

# **Agelessness and its relationship to lifelong learning**

by

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Tasmania**

**May 2005**

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of another degree or diploma in any institute, college and university, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

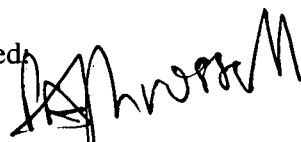
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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the concept of agelessness and considers whether there is a relationship between agelessness and lifelong learning. For the purposes of this investigation a person who is perceived to have agelessness qualities is defined, “A person who conducts their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in.”

The concept of agelessness is explored in terms of personality characteristics. The study also considers the links between agelessness and lifelong learning with a view to establishing possible connections between agelessness, lifelong learning, and social wellbeing. The presuming contention is that agelessness in a person enables him/her to choose to respond to learning opportunities throughout his/her life. An assumption is made that learning is how we adapt to change.

Cultural perceptions about age, which are often based on ageist stereotypes, can perpetuate attitudes, behaviours and values following the myths and misconceptions engendered. Limitations on the way our lives are conducted can also have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our life.

The study utilises a three-phase methodology with an emphasis on the development and analysis of participant narratives. In Phase One, a descriptive survey method was followed, while in Phase Two, focus groups discussed key study variables. In Phase Three, in order to consider the results of Phases One and Two, biographical case study life histories were constructed, and analysed using narrative analysis techniques.

As well as investigating the concept of agelessness, the study ascertained influences, such as epiphanies or turning points (Denzin 2001), that may have contributed to an agelessness mind-set. Insights into these processes, and their linkage to lifelong learning, may assist in encouraging and facilitating individuals of any chronological age in adapting to change and choosing to improve their wellbeing by understanding and restricting negative age-related influences.

Findings from the study suggested that agelessness can be understood in terms of demonstrated personality characteristics. However, discussion of the lives of case study subjects revealed a deeper picture, with dominant themes emerging from the display of lived personality characteristics across a variety of situated contexts. These themes demonstrated the importance of a person’s approach to change in responding to a range of life experiences. While the exploration of the key variables demonstrated some linkage between characteristics of agelessness and lifelong learning, and their relationship to social wellbeing, a more complex understanding of issues related to ageing and the concept of agelessness was developed. For example, learning in response to adversity seems to be a major influence on the extent to which the case study subjects exhibited characteristics of agelessness.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My Mum inspired this study. She loved, supported and encouraged me as a loyal friend and mainstay throughout the study, as she always did in life. She died in December 2004. There are no words to acknowledge her gift to me. I send her my gratitude and love.

My sincere thanks go to all the subjects of the three phases of the study for their willing involvement and support. Their interest and honest responses were greatly valued. In particular my thanks and respect go to the case study subjects for their open, sincere and focused comments in all the interviews.

I also thank my co-supervisors Professor Ian Falk and Associate-Professor Sue Kilpatrick for their invaluable knowledge, depth of understanding and interest throughout the course of the study. Their expert guidance, encouragement and insight were deeply appreciated.

My deep love and appreciation goes to Henry, Abbey and Paul Throssell for their unwavering encouragement, loyalty and support, and for being there throughout the study. I especially thank Abbey for her invaluable, scrupulous and memorable attention to editing. Henry always kept me focused on what is important in life.

My gratitude also goes to Zarah Cohen for her stimulating company and encouragement, and to Dr. Tim Moss and Dr. Neville Grady for their advice at vital times.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

In all societies the concept of chronological ageing brings with it cultural perceptions. Chronological age has application in all cultures in terms of expectations of acceptable behaviours and values to be exhibited at particular ages, especially older ages (Amoss and Harrell 1981). In effect this creates stereotypes from which it is difficult to deviate, causing individuals to become 'culture-bound' (Sargent, Nilan and Winter 1997).

Chronological age, being a measurement of age based on the amount of time lived, has widespread societal usage. In our culture it is a social construct often used for societal organisation purposes (Settersten and Mayer 1997, Whitton 2001), such as a guide for school grading or in regard to retirement age. However, the use of chronological age can be restrictive in a variety of ways. Viewing individuals in age-stereotypical ways has been suggested as a key contributing factor in inter-generational conflict (Neugarten 1972, Longman 1986, Biggs 1993, Dychtwald 1999). Also, age limitations on the way our lives are conducted may have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our lives.

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the conceptual framework. After Section 1.2 considers the background to the study, Section 1.3 outlines the purpose of the study and key definitions, and Section 1.4 discusses the significance of the study. Section 1.5 relates the specific research questions of the study, while Section 1.6 provides a summary in the form of an overview of the study design, and indicates limitations of the study. Section 1.7 gives an outline of the chapters in this dissertation.

### **1.2 Background to the study**

Recent biomedical, health care and social developments have contributed to increased longevity in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [A.B.S.] 2000a) and throughout the

world (United Nations 1998a). This increased longevity has created progressively more ageing societies, both in the Western world and worldwide (United Nations 1998a), with associated economic effects that will necessitate increasing political involvement in related social issues.

As a result of increased longevity a deeper understanding of issues related to ageing is necessary. This would be beneficial for individuals potentially living longer, and for governments in terms of social costs through effective policy-making and implementation. A range of ageing issues is highlighted by the effects of age-based influences on increased longevity, including perceptions of the kind of longer life that might be lived, the link between social wellbeing and age, and also myths and misconceptions concerning the effect of higher chronological age.

This increased longevity has a potential for an increasingly important relationship to the role of learning during the whole of our lives. Lifelong learning, both in informal and formal settings, has received attention in recent times, and can be viewed as critical in adapting to change throughout life (Fullan 1993, Candy, Crebert and O'Leary 1994, Paye 1996, Kearns 1999). It is also suggested as a way of improving aspects of quality of life (OECD 1994). Furthermore, while informal learning is influential (Candy et al 1994, Eraut 2000), lifelong learning is often a key aim of formal institutional learning, affecting teaching methodology and curriculum content, though Candy (2000, p.29) comments on "...the unfortunate tendency to confuse 'learning' with 'schooling'..." However, cultural perceptions relating to chronological age would appear to continue to limit involvement in learning throughout life.

Some people, nevertheless, appear to conduct their lives in ways that are not age-stereotypical. These people, of any age, may be regarded as attaining and demonstrating agelessness characteristics. The term agelessness has been chosen, partly because it has been discussed in recent literature (Kaufman 1986, Andrews 1999, 2000, Bytheway 2000), and also as it is commonly used within social settings as a word relating to age in a non-classifying way. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989, p.247) defines the word

agelessness as “The quality of being ageless. Without old age or limits of duration; never waxing old or coming to an end”. However, in relation to characteristics such as behaviour, attitudes and values in modern usage or in the literature related to an individual, the meaning of the term agelessness is not clearly identifiable.

### **1.3 Purpose of the study and key definitions**

The purpose of this study is first to investigate the concept of agelessness. Once it has elaborated on an understanding of the characteristics of agelessness, and situated context influences such as home, business, or institutions, it considers further whether there is a relationship between agelessness and lifelong learning.

The choice of the term agelessness for this study enables exploration of concepts related to age. For the purposes of the current investigation a person who is perceived to have agelessness qualities is proposed as: A person who conducts their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in. This may include exhibiting behaviours, and holding attitudes and values that do not follow cultural perceptions pertaining to age.

The study will also ascertain influences on attaining or developing characteristics of agelessness, in particular critical life events such as epiphanies. Denzin (2001, p.34) defines epiphanies as “interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives... having had such a moment the person is never the same again”. These moments of enlightenment, that change a life, for the purposes of this study, are also described as turning points.

Aspin and Chapman (2000, p.16) define lifelong learning as being based upon:

...a complex and multi-faceted process, that begins in pre-school, is carried on through compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training, and is then continued throughout life, through provision of such learning

experiences, activities and enjoyment in the home, in the work-place, in universities and colleges, and in other educational, social and cultural agencies, institutions and settings - both formal and informal - within the community.

However, a concern in the definition given regards the need for 'lifelong' to include all learning from birth to death, including informal learning from birth and formal education, as well as learning at all other times, with all of life's experiences having learning or the potential for learning inherent in them. As Aspin and Chapman's (2000) definition suggests lifelong learning starting with an institutional setting, pre-school, the definition of lifelong learning for the purpose of this study was amended to:

A complex and multi-faceted informal and formal learning process. It begins at birth, and is carried on through informal learning, as well as compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training. It continues throughout life, through informal and formal learning experiences, activities and enjoyment in the home, in the work-place, in universities and colleges, and in other educational, social and cultural agencies, institutions and settings within the community. (Adapted from Aspin and Chapman 2000, p.16)

#### **1.4 Significance of the study**

An exploration of the concept of agelessness and associated attitudes to age, and in particular the relationship between agelessness and lifelong learning would be beneficial to deeper understanding of ageing issues. This is particularly relevant in consequence of the effect that increased longevity has on the role of learning during the whole of our lives.

Insights into the processes that may contribute to an agelessness mind-set, and consideration of any linkage to lifelong learning, may assist in encouraging and facilitating individuals of any age to choose to improve their social wellbeing by

understanding and restricting negative age-related influences. Social wellbeing is regarded as being:

(1) the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves; (2) the resources necessary to meet the expectable challenges, even the extraordinary challenges, of life in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways; and (3) the attachment of meaning to life that makes pursuit of aging well seem relevant and compelling (Antonovsky 1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11).

Furthermore, people may be assisted in choosing to develop and demonstrate agelessness characteristics in their lives and to resist cultural chronological stereotypes in relation to ageing.

Learning communities have benefits both for individuals and within society generally (Kearns 1999, Kilpatrick, Barrett, and Jones 2003). This study, by assisting in understanding of people who may demonstrate agelessness characteristics and an openness to ongoing learning, is likely to have considerable implications for learning communities within the learning society.

## 1.5 Research questions

The thesis of this study was that agelessness is related to lifelong learning. It was proposed that agelessness in individuals enables them to choose to respond to learning opportunities throughout their lives, with an assumption made that learning is the mechanism by which we adapt to change.

Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.39) maintain that a research question should be formed to “provide the flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth”. Consequently, the guiding research question is: How does agelessness relate to lifelong learning? From

the guiding research question evolved a number of sub-questions that assist in enabling the major research question to be given thoughtful consideration.

Research Question One: What are the characteristics of agelessness?

Research Question Two: What are the characteristics of lifelong learning?

Research Question Three: What are the connections between agelessness and social wellbeing?

Research Question Four: Why do some individuals exhibit characteristics of agelessness?

Research Question Five: Do critical life events influence an individual's choices associated with attaining agelessness?

Research Question Six: What comparisons can be made between perceived characteristics of agelessness and perceived characteristics of lifelong learning?

## **1.6 Study design and limitations**

This study investigated the concept of agelessness and further compared agelessness with characteristics of lifelong learning and aspects of social wellbeing. It was developed in three phases. Firstly, in Phase One, a descriptive survey sought identification of key characteristics of agelessness in terms of the study definition. In Phase Two, focus groups discussed the emerged Phase One characteristics of agelessness, and key study variables, namely agelessness, lifelong learning and aspects of social wellbeing, and some suggested linkages. Furthermore, situated context influences related to the variables were discussed. The term 'situated' is used interchangeably in this study with 'located' (Denzin 2001), and refers to wide elements of context within which experiences occur. As Lave and Wenger (1991, p.33) assert, "...there is no activity that is not situated... agent, activity and the world mutually constitute each other".

In Phase Three, in order to consider the results of Phases One and Two, biographical case study life histories of people regarded as demonstrating agelessness characteristics were conducted, and analysed by means of narrative analysis techniques. In addition, epiphanies or turning points were focused upon, to determine whether connections could

be made between these critical points in the subjects' lives and any attained characteristics.

The choice of university students as subjects in Phases One and Two is a limitation of the study. This could be regarded as an overly restricted group; however, subjects in Phase Three were selected on a different basis to that of being lifelong learners through acknowledged interest in formal education.

In Phase Two, additional focus groups would have assisted in exploring a wider range of situated contexts related to demonstrations of agelessness characteristics. This was not possible given the amount of time available to the researcher; however, the involvement of two focus groups provided a breadth of data.

### **1.7 Summary of thesis chapters**

This chapter has discussed the conceptual framework of the study, in particular the purpose, background, significance, research questions, and study design, as well as limitations of the study. Chapter Two reviews key research writings within the major study areas. The review includes literature relating to agelessness and age, social wellbeing and lifelong learning. It considers longevity, and present and past aspects of cultural perceptions of age. In response to increasing longevity, the question, "What kind of longer life?" is asked and explored in terms of social wellbeing. Concepts of age as well as theories of age are then considered. It also examines influences on age and ageing, including addressing key issues within the concept of lifelong learning related to modes of formal and informal learning, as well as to the importance of attitudes to age. The term and concept of agelessness is then discussed and related to age and ageing.

Chapter Three discusses the qualitative research methods utilised, and outlines the study methods and procedures. In particular it considers the initial survey, focus groups, and the interpretive interactional approach chosen for data collection in the biographical life



history case studies. It also addresses the data analysis techniques, such as grounded theory, focus group analysis and narrative analysis techniques, employed in the study.

Chapter Four presents the results obtained from Phases One and Two of this study, together with discussion of the results. Chapter Five presents a narrative analysis of each of the three intensive case studies from Phase Three, as well as a cross-case analysis of the case studies. Finally, in Chapter Six research conclusions are synthesised from the three phases of the study. Concluding comments on the study's findings, directions of further research, limitations, and implications for the future are made.

## **Chapter Two: Review of literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter critically reviews the literature relevant to discussing issues related to concepts of age. Discussion occurs in three sections. Firstly, the past and present context of ageing is discussed in terms of the effects of increasing longevity and cultural perceptions of age. As this chapter indicates, it is necessary to have an understanding of past and present views of age and ageing in order to develop initiatives responding to changes in longevity. Secondly, perspectives of the nature of that longer life, including an understanding of the concept of social wellbeing, are examined as a basis for comparison between past and present circumstances and future directions of ageing. Finally, a framework for understanding influences on the perceptions of ageing is discussed in terms of concepts of age and theories related to age. Influences upon the ageing process are then explored in depth, in particular the role of lifelong learning in relation to ageing, and attitudinal perspectives related to age.

As this chapter argues, there is a need to move away from views and usages of age in society that perpetuate and create restrictions in responses to ageing. The concept of agelessness is discussed in terms of the importance of developing a perspective of ageing favourable to changing societal conditions, in particular to benefit choice of learning opportunities in our lives. The chapter concludes with a summary of key issues.

#### **The past and present context of ageing:**

### **2.2 Increasing longevity**

There is an increasing proportion of, and length of time lived for, people of higher age ranges within the Australian population (Olshansky, Carnes and Cassel 1990, Rowe and Kahn 1998). According to the A.B.S. (1999a), by 1998 the proportion of people aged 65 and over in Australia had tripled since Federation (1901); this proportion had reached

12.59% in 2001 (A.B.S. 2002). Apart from increases in proportion of population, the length of time lived on average, at higher ages, can be regarded as substantial. The Australian Life Tables indicate that on reaching 45 years of age, the average years of life remaining are over 33 years for males and 38 years for females (A.B.S. 1995, in Australian Association of Adult and Community Education 1995, p.6). According to the A.B.S. (1999b), at age 65 males have a further life expectancy of 16.1 years, whereas females have a further 19.8 years. The gender differences in longevity are largely unexplained (Verbrugge 1988). For individuals, living longer has a benefit not often realised: "The silver lining of life expectancy calculations is that the longer you live, the longer your total expected life span becomes" (Crispell 1995, p.4).

Notably, in recent times there has been an increase in higher age ranges in Australia. As Mathur (1996, p.6) comments, "The population aged 65 years and over increased by 30% from 1985 to 1994, compared with a general Australian population increase of 13%". While the age group from 0-14 years increased by only 0.03% in the year prior to June 2001, the over 65 group increased by 1.8%. However, for those over 85 years of age the increase was 5.7% (A.B.S. 2001a).

This increase is not likely to be limited to the present times, as the trend is forecast to continue. The A.B.S. (2000a) states, "The population aged 65 years and over is projected to increase rapidly... both in terms of numbers and as a proportion of the total population... to about 4.2 million in 2021 and between 6.4 and 6.8 million in 2051". In proportional terms, this equates to a rise from 12% of the total population in 1998, to a projection of 24% by 2051 (A.B.S. 1999b). As the A.B.S. (2001a) concludes:

Over the past twenty years, low fertility levels have resulted in minimal growth in the number of children aged 0-14 years (5%). In contrast, the number of persons aged 15-64 years has increased by 34%, those aged 65 years and over have increased by 65%, with those aged 85 years and over showing the greatest increase (156%).

It is important to differentiate between longevity and life span. Medina (1996, p.10) defines life span as “The maximum time a person *could* live, given favourable living conditions”. While longevity relates to the years lived and evidence of increases are prevalent, there is little historic or present evidence to connote a potential substantial increase in life span (Brooks 1996). Living longer by different means from those available in the past still does not necessarily increase the span of life for the human species.

The increase, over the past few decades, in the number of older people is not limited to Western nations. The United Nations (1998a) established that the total world population between 1970 and 1998 had swelled by 60%, with the ‘oldest-old’ – those of eighty plus years – increasing by 147% to 66 million. They forecast that people over 60 throughout the world will increase in numbers, “from 580 million in 1998 to almost two billion (1970 million) in 2050” (The United Nations 1998b). Less developed countries, such as Africa, have declining proportions of children but still have significantly increasing proportions of older people. The United Nations (1998b) foresees an increase for less developed countries, in people over 60 years of age, of nine times between 1998 and 2050 from 171 million to 1594 million, and a proportionate increase from eight percent of population to 21 per cent in 2050.

These are significant changes in a relatively short time period, and have ensured that existing patterns of ageing in societies throughout the world will not follow the past. This is especially notable in Australia where, “Since 1982, life expectancy at birth has increased by six years for males and four years for females” (A.B.S. 2003). The median age of Australia's population in 2000 was 35.2 years and this is expected to rise by 2051 to 44-46 years (A.B.S. 2001a). In the United States of America there are more than 61,000 centenarians at present (Rowe and Kahn 1998). While there is a statistical likelihood throughout the world and in Australia of living to an increasingly high age, how these additional years are lived has strong repercussions both for the individual and for society.

There are a number of salient and often interconnecting reasons for this increased longevity. These reasons are a combination of lowered mortality rates and higher life expectancy related to biological developments, genetic dispositions, environmental effects and behavioural influences (A.B.S. 2000b). Improvements in medical technology are credited with being a major influence on longevity (Cetron and Davies 1998, Olshansky, Carnes and Grahn 1998, Rowe and Kahn 1998, Perls and Silver 1999). The increases in longevity from lifestyle and medical improvements are regarded by Olshansky, Carnes and Grahn (1998) as 'manufactured time'. Perls and Silver (1999) maintain that our genetic make-up also has a strong influence on longevity, though they caution against regarding genetic influence as the key factor in itself, suggesting it is interactional with other influences. Maddox (1991, p.8) attributes longevity factors to be "minimally genetic and medical and maximally social and economic. Specifically the main factors are public sanitation and a stable food supply". On a societal level, changes in environmental public systems in combination with medical technology have been influential. As the A.B.S. (2000b, p.2) states:

The reduction in mortality in the early part of this century [the twentieth] has been attributed to improvements in living conditions, such as better water supplies, sewage systems, food quality and health education. The continuing reduction in mortality in the latter half of the century has been attributed to improving social conditions and advances in medical technology such as mass immunisation and antibiotics.

Improved individual behavioural adaptations have also aided longevity. This has included choice of helpful health habits (Rowe and Kahn 1998, Nuland 1999, Perls and Silver 1999), in particular reduction of smoking and increases in exercise (Rowe and Kahn 1998). This is notable in terms of the individual responsibility taken to ensure personal health. Although the major determinants of longevity are generally agreed upon, the comparative effect of each of the factors attributable to longevity is arguable.

### 2.3 Impetus for change

Continuing increases in longevity have implications for society and for individuals. The view of whether the increasing numbers of older people are an “asset or burden” (Rowe and Kahn 1998, p.184) is of significance. Salient issues include inter-generational conflict, age segregation, the growing social force of people at older ages, and societal economic implications.

Inter-generational conflict is an issue that has received considerable attention in recent decades. Longman (1986, p.8) forecast “age wars,” while Neugarten (1972, p.323) emphasised, “...increased numbers of older persons, pose major social problems... and their presence leads to new alignments between age groups”. Dychtwald (1999) maintains that differences in generational identities, such as shared values and experiences, are influential in separating people of different ages. He suggests that the belief system of identifiable age groupings creates a sense of alienation from other groupings, such as his groupings of “matures”, “boomers” and “generation Xers” respectively, having as defining ideas the concepts of duty, individuality and diversity.

This age segregation, the viewing of one age group by another in a negative manner, with differing defining ideas, has the potential to lead to amplified separation of people of all ages. Biggs (1993) discusses the existence of age-related cohorts, where people of similar ages prefer to interact socially with each other, and affirms that, “...the structuring of cohorts by age could lead to a denigration of other groups in the service of developing one’s own group identity” (p.68). Apart from emphasising differences between groups, there can be other influences related to individual views of ageing. As Uhlenberg (2000a, p.262) posits, “...it is likely that age segregation significantly shapes the ways in which people grow up and grow old”.

Age segregation can lead to an us-and-them stance. Bytheway and Johnson (1990) comment on the need for people who are, in their terms, ‘non-old’ to be more open in their intergenerational interactions. Nevertheless, the opportunity for potentially limiting

any age-differentiation can occur in the necessary interactions between ages prevalent in our functioning in society. Despite difficulties created by segregation of age groups, “a bleak scenario” according to Biggs (1993, p.82), age divisiveness is not assured (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987), and is being alleviated by the increasing attention being given to age-related issues through “a wide range of affirmative action programs for older people” (p.44).

Age divisiveness through marginalising people of older ages may not be a societal option in the future as there is a growing social force of older people (Ward 1993, Dychtwald 1999). While in the past older people have often been viewed as playing a lesser role than other groups in society, there are indications of a changing perspective. At its most basic this is a social force of numbers, but it also includes the influence of other areas such as the accumulation of wealth, and the individual’s expectations of playing a meaningful and influential role in society. Also, according to Dychtwald (1999), reaction from generational groups in resisting a changing and less influential role for themselves will occur. The term ‘grey power’ has augmented the policy debate regarding ageing. There are additional expectations of an increasing number of older people participating in public policy formation (Kendig and McCallum 1990), and in the way age is perceived by individuals. As Kersey (1997, pp.256-7) asserts, “...there is no doubt that the soft and timorous voice of the self-effacing aged is growing stronger and will increasingly be heard”.

Although focus has been drawn to older ages by virtue of the increases in longevity, changes in the way age is viewed have repercussions for people of all ages. The viewpoint of younger people in their perception of, and active response to, older people and the concept of ageing generally is not forcefully addressed in the research literature. An exception is the White House Conference on Aging (1996b), which referred to the negative views held by youth participants toward people of older ages, although stressing that the modelling of characteristics of wisdom and experience was potentially beneficial to younger people.

Potential inter-generational conflict is not inevitable in the view of Neugarten and Neugarten (1986). There are social and economic advantages to improved age integration (Attias-Donfut 2000, Kohli 2000, Uhlenberg 2000b) with Foner (2000, p.275) believing that jointly, “mutual economic interests... and affective intergenerational bonds” will hold back conflicts. However, ongoing benefits to individuals will need to be addressed both at a societal level through policy change that takes into account “irrelevant age restraints” (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987, p.46) and at an individual level in viewing in-depth consideration of the issues involved.

One key area is in the projected financial strain being placed on government systems by longer periods of pension payment beyond standard pension ages, and by higher potential health care system usage by the elderly. Concern has been discussed in terms of increasing financial dependency on a lesser proportion of younger people for care of older people. This comparison between the working population and those of a retirement age is referred to as a dependency ratio by Butler (2000a). Peters and Larkin (1999) relate people under 20 years of age and over 64 years of age as being dependent in terms of the dependency ratio. Brooks (1996) predicts health care resource pressure from the elderly, a view supported by Fries (1990, p.2354), who declares that, “As more people live longer, diseases of ageing will dominate the national health care priorities”. Capek (1926), through a character in his novel, sums up this impending economic problem with the observation, “Our social system is based completely upon the shortness of life” (in Roush 1996, p.42).

These economic issues are increasingly likely to merit ongoing governmental policy responses. Extensions of life duration are also likely to have considerable social consequences, creating a social context with considerable implications that cannot be avoided, by governments or individuals. As such, ongoing financial consideration is only one of many issues that will need to be addressed in order to alleviate emerging social difficulties. As author Thomas Keneally (*The Age*, 2002, p.15) asserts:



But now that I've reached this venerable plateau of agedness, I feel passionately affronted on behalf of my contemporaries at the continual statements of governments that we are all a pain in the fiscal backside for being too numerous and being likely to live longer than in the past... It's the inevitability with which they speak. It is one of their self-fulfilling prophecies. Their conviction that they can't any longer sustain the aged at a minimum level of dignity means they have already given themselves every excuse not to.

Keneally raises concerns over the need for an ongoing policy response to issues involving the age structural make up of society. With increasing numbers of people living longer, the approach that governments currently take towards the health and wellbeing of people of older ages is likely to result in the provision of diminished support, especially financial assistance. Changes in longevity have created a focus on older people regarded as embodying stereotypes of ageing, necessitating policy issue considerations that are not merely financial.

Perceptions of age and influences on ageing within the community are currently under increasing discussion through public communication media. Recently a change in attitudes towards retirement age has been suggested in the popular press, with newspaper articles calling for policy initiatives related to ageing on the basis of national benefit. A government report referred to in the 2002 Federal Budget (Ageing Aussies to cost 90 bn. 2002, w7) suggested, "...the burden of supporting an ageing population with fewer workers to drive economic growth, and taxes, would see government spending overtake income in just 15 years". Hewson (2002, p.9) suggested that it is necessary to "provide more opportunities for older people to make contributions... [and] retire the word retired. It's about being unretired". Kearney (2003, p.4) also refers to a Centrelink proposal for people at present above retirement age to work for benefits, while Skills too valuable to waste (2003, p.12) emphasises that action to change the concept of retirement and its linkage to a particular age was needed not only economically but also as a benefit to individuals:

The Federal Government has taken some steps towards raising the age of access to superannuation. It should now be moving towards removing a mandatory age of retirement altogether... instead of working long hours until we are 65 then dropping out altogether, it is better for mental and physical wellbeing to ease out in stages.

In Australia, in recent times the government has taken steps to address prognostications of government financial difficulties from increasing numbers of people above pensionable age. Costello, the Treasurer, acknowledged the pressing problem for governments, announcing his intention to facilitate extended working beyond sixty-five. "We need to move away from concepts of early retirement and compulsory retirement at a set age" (Costello's super plan eases way to old age 2004, p.1). In the United States, compulsory retirement age is already illegal (Rowe and Kahn 1998).

From the increasing incidence of reports such as these, it might appear that some thrust towards change relating to retirement transitional age, function and status in Australia is not too distant. However, the basis for this may well be fundamentally economic and within present structures such as retirement, the suggested benefits to individuals might occur haphazardly and linked only to financial outcomes.

The emphasis often placed on an individual's preparedness for retirement could be detrimental to the way life is lived. As Ekerdt (2004, p.8) comments, it is "like a journey that is dominated by thoughts of the destination". The prominence given to individual provision of economic security can be paradoxical; Ekerdt (2004, p.8) further comments on possible unplanned effects, such as "a stronger retirement norm, reluctance to spend money on children, and expectations of retirement it cannot fulfil". It is clear that individuals will need to take an increasingly responsible role in benefiting their own ageing processes.

Furthermore, with the likelihood of less support being provided by governments in areas such as retirement, increased individual responsibility for a range of personal learning in

response to change, health, and welfare issues is likely to occur. Changes are already occurring in the improvement of individuals' health habits, as mentioned previously.

As a result, personal responsibility for many facets of an individual's life is likely to be increased. Moreover, increases in individual responsibility are occurring at a time of increasing diversity in terms of other societal expectations. This includes aspects such as a range of life transitions (as discussed later in this chapter), as well as necessary ongoing responses to change in society, for instance, through technological change.

## **2.4 Cultural perceptions of age and ageing**

Increasing longevity has ensured that both societies and individuals will need to make ongoing responses to evolving changes in circumstances. For this to occur, an understanding of past and present perceptions of age is likely to assist consideration of appropriate and beneficial change. Towards this purpose, cultural influences, historical and present stereotypes, ageism, and myths and misconceptions relating to ageing are addressed. For this study, a stereotype is regarded as "a set of characteristics or a fixed idea considered to represent a particular kind of person" (Oxford English Dictionary 1989, p.765).

The influence of culture has a paramount effect on both the individual and on society. Krieken et al (2000, p.6) maintain that:

Culture shapes our view of the world, influencing the assumptions we have about who we are, our location in the cosmos and how we should relate to other people. The ways in which we think and feel, the outlook we have on life and the feelings we give to situations are all located within the culture in which we are reared.

A person is restricted in behaviour and values by cultural expectations (Sargent et al 1997). One illustration is that an individual's concept of retirement might change their behaviour, mind-set, sense of self-worth and perceptions of their ability to attempt new

challenges, leading to the “You can't teach an old dog new tricks” thinking often suggested in common usage. Furthermore, according to Amoss and Harrell (1981, p.3):

Every known society has a named social category of people who are old – chronologically, physiologically, or generationally. In every case these people have different rights, duties, privileges, and burdens from those enjoyed or suffered by their juniors.

Perceptions from society both of acceptable behaviours and of values to be exhibited at particular ages can create stereotypes from which it is difficult to deviate without actual and implied societal pressure being administered. Sargent et al (1997, p.81) further comment:

One result of the limitations put on human beings by culture is that it becomes very difficult for us to escape from the patterns of behaviour and thinking learned through social practice. We become *culture-bound* – as if wearing (rose-) tinted spectacles which cannot be removed.

Age-based restrictions can result in being culture-bound (Sargent et al 1997), creating potential limitations for the way a life is lived. For example, displaying curiosity may be held by a person to be situationally appropriate according to a particular age and context, perhaps restricting the individual's choice to utilise the trait – to be 'in or out' of it (R.E. Stake, Personal Communication, November 14-15 2000).

Being culture-bound can arise from societal or individuals' perceptions of stereotypes of chronological age, leading to perceived negative limitations, such as the inter-generational differentiations discussed earlier, or through the ways older ages have been viewed historically. Historically, age has often been portrayed in negative stereotypical ways by society. Shakespeare's Hamlet (in Craig 1904, p.954), submits that “...old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with the most weak hams...”

Confirmation that this generally pessimistic view has continued to present times is provided by Butler:

An older person thinks and moves slowly... can no longer change or grow... he [sic] dislikes innovations... enters a second childhood... becomes irritable and cantankerous... the picture of mental and physical failure... he has lost his desire and capacity for sex... feeble, uninteresting, he awaits his death, a burden to society, to his family and to himself. (1975, p.6 in Beck 1986, p.11)

These stereotypical views reinforce perceptions of increasing chronological age as something to be avoided, if it were possible to do so.

Furthermore, apart from historical stereotypical perceptions, on a societal level, the present picture is often reinforced through cultural stereotyping based on structures of chronological age. These structures and categorisations are influential. As Tennant and Pogson (1995, p.99) state, "...age structures, like other social structures such as gender and class, become embedded in the psychology of individuals". This embedding is impacted further by the other stereotypical influences prevalent in a particular society. For older persons in Western society, perceptions may be illustrated by Kalish's (1979, p.398) theory of new ageism, which observed that the societal perception:

...stereotypes "the elderly" in terms of the characteristics of the least capable, least healthy and least alert of the elderly...(and portrays) the older person as, in effect, a relatively helpless and dependent individual who requires the support services of agencies and other organizations.

This labelling, according to categories of chronological age, further restricts choice of behaviours different from the label (Australian Association of Adult and Community Education 1995).

However, it is not just those of older chronological ages that have been categorised. Younger people might be similarly stereotyped in terms of negative characteristics. Dychtwald (1999, p.86) asserts that in the way these different areas of life related to age are viewed, there has been a “reshuffling of the deck” by adjustment of the titles attributed to areas of life according to chronological age. Previously:

... psychologists have defined the period of “youth” – including infancy, childhood, and adolescence – as running from birth to approximately age 18; then “young adulthood” occupies the years from 18 to 35. “Middle age” is considered to begin in the late 30’s, ending around age 50. “Late adulthood” picks up from there and runs right into “old age” which is usually defined as starting at 65 and continuing until death.

The titles accorded to areas of age are now less specifically stereotypical. Middle and old age, for example, cannot be specifically stated as being within particular chronological age ranges.

Stereotypes that embody cultural age perceptions may disadvantage both society and the individual. The perception of inevitable decline can influence, in a discriminatory sense, both the individual and others’ view of that individual, based on their age (Bytheway and Johnson 1990). Friedan (1993, p.x) refers to “that dread mystique that is responsible for our own and for society’s fear of age”. An illustration of a stereotypical misconception is related by Fries (1990) who refers to the high proportion, 99 per cent, of people of 75 years of age or below in the United States who are not living in nursing homes, a figure which seems contradictory to a prevailing stereotype. Swindell (1999, p.235) asserts that, “Many people in society have a negative view about the capabilities of the ageing population despite ample evidence from everyday life that the stereotypes they maintain are wrong”.

However, there is a considerable body of current research, including Sternberg (1995) and the MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Ageing (in Rowe and Kahn 1998),

that is steadily challenging this perception in terms of attributed deficiencies and limitations, and their extent. Common perceptions that can lead to personal fears of ageing effects are in areas such as cognitive decline leading to cognitive deficiencies, and in physical limitations. However, in the cognitive domain of mental functioning, as Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.19) suggest, high self-efficacy can improve cognitive functioning, and they further comment, "...fears of age-related loss are often exaggerated". Sternberg (1995) relates that the incidence of Alzheimer's disease among older people is far more infrequent than generally thought. That cognitive debility is lesser than previously thought is also confirmed by Sternberg (1995), Keefover (1998) and Rowe and Kahn (1998). Fillit et al (2002, p.681) state that, "cognitive decline is clearly not inevitable," with Sdorow (1990) maintaining that mental activity lessens any potential cognitive decline. Keeton (1992, p.41) maintains that, "...many researchers are beginning to conclude that the deterioration of aging brains has been greatly exaggerated". The view of cognitive decline being inevitable is clearly being questioned, and as a result, this is changing perceptions of the extent of decline or as to whether there is any decline at all.

Similarly, the view of inevitable physical decline through ageing is also receiving attention. Physical decline can be reduced by exercise and dietary intake (Marwick 1995); Ruchlin and Lachs (1999) suggest that there are health benefits for older people from physical exercise. Nuland (1999) maintains the physiological benefits of weight bearing and aerobic exercise in improving physical capabilities for older people and thereby in reducing physical frailty, while McAuley (1993 in Kelly 1993) maintains that physical activity also assists self-efficacy.

As Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.98) confirm, there are considerable benefits in physical functioning to older people from lifelong and moderate regular exercise: "Fitness boosts strength; it cuts the risk of death; it improves mood and reduces the impact of other health risks. But keep this in mind; you have to use it or risk losing it". Also, designating age accurately from physical appearance may be becoming more difficult, with Shenfield (2003) commenting upon the increasing difficulties of visually attributing age to individuals.

Although some decline in physical and cognitive abilities can occur through ageing, the decline would appear not to be inevitable, or to the extent stereotyped. Furthermore, the releasing of potential (Baltes and Carstensen 1996, Nuland 1999) can also address an individual's perception of decline. This releasing of potential can lead to flexibility in individual responsiveness to ageing, such as increased exercise having physical benefits. Fillit et al (2002) note, "animal and human studies suggest that lifelong learning, mental and physical exercise, continuing social engagement, stress reduction, and proper nutrition may be important factors in promoting cognitive vitality in aging".

This has particular importance in relation to the messages society communicates. The mass media, for example, promote a societal valuing of youth, especially physical looks and healthful movement, while seemingly providing negative portrayal of the expectations and effects of ageing, or simply omitting images and responses of those not adjudged to be attractive due to age (Friedan 1993; Dychtwald 1999). These hidden and not so hidden messages may be influential in socialising individuals to expect particular behaviours, attitudes and presentation of people based on their chronological age.

Apart from stereotypical presentation of older people in relation to physical and mental attributes, the presentation of older people in relation to their contribution to society is often displayed in the media in a negative stereotypical manner. This may appear to show, in television and newspaper stories for example, that people of higher chronological age are providing little in resource outcomes through non-participation or retirement, and can be viewed as a negative influence within the context of national productivity. This view can be certainly refuted (Falk, Golding, and Balatti 2000); and furthermore Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.192), in maintaining that the benefit to society of voluntary work from older people often goes unnoticed, suggest that the unpaid nature of much of the work renders people fulfilling these activities to be designated as "officially invisible".



Nevertheless, the downbeat profile given is a further indication that if chronological age continues to be a major perceived determinant of societal or personal role, then limitations may be being placed on the way an individual functions at different ages throughout their life, with implications both to society and to the individual. Stereotypical perceptions relating to chronological age at all ages can lead to a wide, primarily negative range of ageist behaviours, attitudes and thinking patterns. These could include the way language and speech is used or should be used, and also conforming to expectations of age-appropriate clothing, physical attributes, movement, body image and health.

Economic pressure associated with increasing proportions of people of higher chronological ages in our society may be one stimulus to changing perceptions related to age. However, for individuals likely to live considerably longer, on average, than previous generations, existing stereotypes may limit responses to ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1998).

It is argued that societal observance of these negative limitations can lead, to ageism. "Ageism: [is] Another form of bigotry" according to Butler (1969, p.243) in describing ageism as age-based discrimination. Ageism leads to several unhelpful and potentially detrimental applications in everyday life. Restrictions could occur in a number of ways: by perceptions within society generally, through limiting messages related by the use of ageist language, lessening opportunities within employment areas, and even by restrictions in health care as people age.

Nuessel (1982, p.273) describes how ageist language is often used in a pessimistic and unhelpful manner:

The language used to depict the elderly is overwhelmingly negative in its scope. Moreover, many ageist terms are doubly offensive because they contain both ageist and sexist references. Such deprecatory language is a linguistic mirror of the pervasive individual and institutional ageism in our society.

The use of ageist terminology is apparent in everyday communications. One example is in how birthday greeting cards emphasise increasing age in an often derogatory manner, endorsing popular usage of prevalent ageist terms. Nuessel (1982, p.274) further comments on the meaning behind phrases used in this manner, "...declining years, second childhood, over the hill, twilight years – insinuate decadence, decline, or foolish behaviour". The use of stereotypical and ageist terms is indicative of a prevailing societal view and can be symptomatic of a deeper perception. As Emmitt and Pollock state (2000, p.50), "language reflects the values of a culture".

In this study the word 'older' has been used to denote people of higher chronological age, as a comparison with those having lived less years, though no classification of the exact number of years this entails has been made. Words such as 'aged' or 'elderly' have not been used, as it is felt that a labelling classification occurs. As Bytheway (2000, p.788) asserts, "anti-ageist gerontology should be promoting a relativist vocabulary rather than an absolutist one". He refers to words relating to disability that have been omitted from usage, such as 'moron' and 'cripple', and he gives 'elderly' as a word that has present labelling limitations and should, therefore, be likewise omitted from usage. Gibson (2000, p.776) suggests countering ageism by the rehabilitation of the term 'elderly' by sole use of the word in a non-stereotypical manner, but overlooks the use of the word in an absolutist age-categorical sense.

There is further evidence that ageism is not limited to the past but continues in the present. The existence of discrimination persists in employment settings, particularly in regard to negative stereotyping of older workers (Eglit 1989, Loretto, Duncan and White 2000). Loretto et al (2000) suggest that ageism towards younger employees is also common. An additional example exists in the health care system where older patients can receive lesser service and care than younger patients (Rivlin 1995, Evans 1997, Stevens and Herbert 1997, Minichiello, Browne and Kendig 2000). Butler (1975, p.893) suggests that "The psychiatric profession's therapeutic nihilism toward the elderly may reflect unresolved countertransference issues that result in a form of prejudice called 'ageism'". In more recent years this issue continues to be raised and debated. Bernard (1998, p.633)

comments, "...ageism is not only rife amongst the population at large, but also amongst many of those who care for older people in a professional capacity".

Ageism, by restricting the way people are viewed on the basis of their age, is likely to limit the opportunities for individual choice. It is a labelling process that can separate a particular group from others in society by virtue of age (Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig 2000). Evans (1997, p.822) further concludes that, "Ageism is as unethical as sexism and racism, since it focuses on a feature that cannot be altered. It is prejudice that old age is worth less than youth and deserves lesser care and expense". Ageism is often a subtle process and can be regarded as symptomatic of a view of older people as being less significant than younger people, with consequent potential repercussions on individual perceptions of ageing. However, ageism can be damaging for individuals in any age group, including younger people. As Nuessel (1982, p.274) asserts, "The cumulative effects of individual and institutional ageism are devastating".

Consequently, development of ways to address ageism would be beneficial. The White House Conference on Aging (1996a, p.87) suggests a need to be "Promoting positive images of aging by sensitizing society to the value of older adults". A promising strategy to reverse the negative stereotypical perception of older people in society is suggested by Ragan and Bowen (2001) who, by presenting accurate information on older people, achieved some success in overcoming ageist misunderstandings. A further approach to disperse misunderstanding by young people of older people is advocated by Golub, Filipowicz and Langer (2002, p.292) as training in mindful thinking: "By questioning ageing stereotypes, we free ourselves from their mindless repetition and fulfilment".

Cultural perceptions that are based on stereotypes and ageist actions can have harmful consequences by leading to attitudes towards age that follow the myths and misconceptions engendered within the culture. Amongst these potential fallacies are perceptions relating to health, intellectual capacities, attitude and inability to respond

favourably to new learning situations. Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.11) refer to six myths of ageing. These are:

To be old is to be sick; You can't teach an old dog new tricks; The horse is out of the barn; The secret to successful ageing is to choose your parents wisely; The lights may be on but the voltage is low; and The elderly don't pull their own weight.

The issues inherent in these myths are certainly worthy of attention, being common misconceptions, and are referred to in other parts of this chapter in terms of health, learning, intellectual decline, physical capabilities and social dependency. Powell (1998, p.v) suggests a number of similar myths, further including "all old people are pretty much the same" and "aging is a boring subject", and indicates for both of these an increasing divergence in how ageing is being perceived and lived. However, while the myths may have some basis of truth (Rowe and Kahn 1998), at the least a false impression is given, and more likely a misunderstanding of individuals is fostered by the suggested stereotypes for older ages.

### **Perspectives on a longer life:**

#### **2.5 What kind of longer life might people live?**

While there is an increase in longevity, the question can then be asked as to what kind of longer life might people live (Phillipson 1998, Rowe and Kahn 1998, Diener, Wirtz, and Oishi 2001)? Olshansky, Carnes and Cassel (1990) suggest more focus on quality of life is needed in relation to change brought about by longevity, and maintain, "we may be trading off a longer life for a prolonged period of frailty and dependency" (p.633). Bonita (1997, p.1167) also advocates the need for further understanding of whether "sick or disabled people are merely surviving longer". Diener et al (2001, p.124) question whether simply achieving longevity is an essential element in quality of life and suggest that the pattern of a life lived is more critical to perceptions of quality of life. Their research

demonstrated that respondents viewed “a wonderful life that ended abruptly as better than one with additional milder years,” an approach they label the James Dean Effect, based on the film star who died while in his twenties. However, they also put forward the view that if an individual was confronted with immediate cessation of life, there may well be a different response in actuality from the James Dean Effect. The Gerontological Society of America (2004) has as its motto “adding life to years, not just more years to life” raising the question of what comprises the basis for the added ‘life’.

Determinants of quality of life are often discussed within the context of disability. One view is suggested by Arnesen and Nord (1999, p.1423), who refer to the World Health Organisation’s designation of QALYs (Quality Adjusted Life Years) and DALYs (Disability Adjusted Life Years). The terms are rated by adjustments made through physical and mental disabilities, and are likely to be viewed as limited in their general applicability. However, quality of life can be viewed homogeneously, and not limited to bounded areas such as disability or to a category of age such as higher chronological age. The concept of quality of life has relevance to people of any chronological age. As such, personal perspectives of what is the quality of life could be different for different people, and could include a wide range of aspects such as cognitive vitality (Fillit et al 2002), or happiness, or being satisfied with a life situation.

While quality of life would seem to be an important element in any discussion related to longer life and ageing generally, what determines quality of life is debatable. Bonita (1997, p.1167) proposes that a societal view is needed, to enable equality of opportunity as the basis for quality of life, and asserts that, “Alleviating the conditions of poverty, and equalising the life expectancy at birth, is essential to making a longer life worth living”. Societal improvements in conditions of living are likely to assist in the creation of a measure of economic and opportunistic fairness, providing the chance for individuals to have increased self-determining opportunities. Societal structures and policies can therefore assist in countering stereotypes of ageing through the overcoming of adverse and restrictive societal perceptions of age, and in effect these initiatives assist in creating

the basis for individuals to choose opportunities for developing their own perception of quality of life.

The 1995 White House Conference on Aging (1996a) suggests the quality of productive life is the aim for ageing. While focusing on people of higher chronological ages, the conference highlighted economic security, health and social wellbeing as being guiding principles for achieving a productive life in ageing. The conference suggested that these aims should be addressed holistically as each principle was interactive with the others. Notably, the recommended emphasis was primarily on providing economically supportive governmental policy as the basis for enabling personal empowerment (White House Conference on Aging 1996b).

## **2.6 Social wellbeing and age**

For the purpose of this study, subjective social wellbeing is viewed as providing the basis for individual empowerment in choosing quality of life in ageing. Although social wellbeing can clearly be viewed as significant in achieving quality of life, it is often referred to in broad terms. The A.B.S. (2001b, p.6) views social wellbeing as being the result of all the interactions within a culture, and states that individually, it “can include the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of life”. Achievement of social wellbeing is suggested as being through a combination of social, environmental and intergenerational support, as well as responsiveness to individual diversity (White House Conference on Aging 1996b). Characteristics regarded as salient in personal wellbeing (Australian Unity Wellbeing Index 2003, p.1) incorporate “economic, environmental, and social conditions”. A range of aspects is outlined including standard of living, health, achievements in life, personal relationships, happiness and spiritual/religious beliefs. While many of the aspects stated could be influential in wellbeing, listing of aspects as equivalent to one another may not be an accurate representation of social wellbeing in practice. Furthermore, the statement of an overall score based on aggregation in the index similarly suggests emphasis of proportional statistical influence on elements of wellbeing in a life.

While societal circumstances clearly are important as a basis for individual opportunity for empowerment, demonstrated personality characteristics are notably influential in the concept of the happy person expressed by Diener et al (1999). They view happiness as a central part of subjective wellbeing, and suggest, in a review of the past three decades of research into subjective wellbeing since a study on the subject by Wilson (1967 in Diener et al 1999), that there has been a notable change in the concept of the happy person.

Diener et al (1999, p.295) state that:

Considerable progress has been made. Wilson believed the happy person to be well-paid, young, educated, religious, and married. We would emphasize that the happy person is blessed with a positive temperament, tends to look on the bright side of things, and does not ruminate excessively about bad events, and is living in an economically developed society, has social confidants, and possesses adequate resources for making progress toward valued goals.

Increasingly, changes in individual responsibility in creating personal social wellbeing are occurring. From Wilson's picture of the happy person as being located in a stable societal position, the more recent description of a happy person, while located in a developed society is viewed as being autonomous and active. Levy (1978) suggests three key aspects of play have an influence on health and the development of individuality: an emphasis on intrinsic motivation, suspension of reality – being “the loss of the ‘real self’ and the temporary acceptance of an ‘illusory self’ or ‘imaginary self’”(p.12) – and also internal locus of control. He contends that play provides the opportunity for achieving happiness through authentic development of our individuality.

A concept of happiness would seem to be limiting in terms of the “physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of life” (A.B.S. 2001b). Accordingly, the “economic, environmental, and social conditions” of the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (2003) and a combination of social environmental and intergenerational support, as well as

responsiveness to individual diversity from the White House Conference on Aging (1996b), can also be regarded as diverse elements of wellbeing.

However, Antonovsky's (1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11) principal foundations for wellbeing would seem to provide a useful focus for empowerment in social wellbeing and are likely to be influential on a range of personal life circumstances. Antonovsky developed these foundations as salutogenic theory (Antonovsky 1979) as a further basis for assisting with understandings of illness and health, which he determined could be adjudged to be located on a continuum between "health ease/dis-ease". He refers to the place on this continuum as a sense of coherence (Antonovsky 1994, p.5). For the purpose of this study the following are regarded as the definition of social wellbeing:

(1) the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves; (2) the resources necessary to meet the expectable challenges, even the extraordinary challenges, of life in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways; and (3) the attachment of meaning to life that makes pursuit of aging well seem relevant and compelling (Antonovsky 1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11).

In terms of the kind of longer life to be chosen by individuals, this view of social wellbeing particularly emphasises individual empowerment in response to changes throughout life.

A first principal foundation of Antonovsky (1987 in Maddox 1991) regards the areas of self-reflection and response to expectations as being salient in terms of the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves. Reflection is discussed later as a key area in transformational learning (Mezirow 2000), and is regarded as critical in adjustment to change. In terms of social wellbeing, self-reflection is viewed as important to self-understanding. The review of an experience, in terms of discovery as a basis for modification of actions involved in the experience, could include a wide range of activities:



...making inferences, generalizations, analogies, discriminations, and evaluations, as well as feeling, remembering, and solving problems. It also seems to refer to using beliefs to make an interpretation, to analyze, perform, discuss, or judge – however unaware one may be of doing so. (Mezirow 1990, p.5)

In terms of personal ageing, an individual examines expectations of ageing through the processes outlined. Examples include exploring our own perceptions of ageing, our view of age, and changing cultural stereotypes of age. The difficulties and challenges inherent in self-understanding through reflective processes are described by Mezirow (1990, p.12) as, “challenging our established and habitual patterns of expectations, the meaning perspectives with which we have made sense out of our encounters with the world, others and ourselves”.

Self-reflection is a salient issue in the way our ageing occurs. Andrews (1999, p.313) views a potential clash between self-reflection and the incorporation of transformation and stability, as represented by the outlooks, “‘you’re only as old as you feel’ (continuity) and ‘you’re as old as you are’ (change)”, and concludes that positions of interaction between change and continuity are inherent in a durable self-identity. Transformational learning is discussed in more detail later in this chapter and related to the learning impact of life experiences, while authenticity and genuineness are also discussed later in terms of integrity of self-representation in ageing.

Secondly, health, resilience, and self-efficacy are discussed as prevalent internal resources in responding to life circumstances in a favourable and fulfilling manner. Brooks (1994, p.231) refers to the salutogenic theory of Antonovsky in describing this foundation as manageability, being “the extent to which one perceives that the resources at one’s disposal are adequate to meet the demands imposed”. The central notion of resilience is discussed later in this chapter. Health is clearly important as a characteristic of individual social wellbeing, though according to Brooks (1996) it is not essential, suggesting the possibility of social wellbeing without good health.

Nevertheless, good health can assist as a basis for quality of life in ageing. Eubie Blake, on reaching the age of one hundred (in Kirkwood 1999, p.63), confirms the importance that might be placed on care of the body, pertaining to quality of life, when he comments that, "If I'd known I was going to live this long I'd have taken better care of myself". Stahl and Feller (1990, in Brooks 1996, p.280) further contend:

One misconception about older people that persists in spite of increasing evidence to the contrary concerns the idea that growing old inevitably results in health problems. Another is that there will be substantial deterioration of the ageing person's physical capacities.

Attitudes towards maintenance and improvement of health throughout life are continuing to alter. An example is in the physical area where the benefits of increasing exercise to assist healthy ageing are advocated (Rowe and Kahn 1998, Ruchlin and Lachs 1999). Cognitive activity is similarly supported by The Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (SEETRC 1997), who suggest that, "There is emerging evidence of a positive correlation between older people engaging in intellectually stimulating pursuits and their physical and psychological wellbeing. Such stimulation appears to delay the onset of symptoms of dementia and similar degenerative diseases". Improved awareness and action on physical and mental aspects of personal health care are altering perceptions of health in ageing.

Furthermore, an increasing emphasis on self-responsibility for health is emerging (The White House Conference on Aging 1996b, Rowe and Kahn 1998, Nuland 1999, Perls and Silver 1999). Ageing has often been viewed on the basis of illness, bringing with it the concept of inevitable decline, increasing health care costs and the necessity of professional health care. However, a different view has become known, initially propounded by the World Health Organization (1947 in Grant 1996) as viewing health in terms of wellbeing, and recently suggested as wellness (The White House Conference on Aging 1996b), incorporating a range of individual health care and illness prevention

measures. Importantly, it is increasingly suggested that responsibility for personal health care is with the individual.

The individual's ability to choose and control aspects of a life can have influence in life outcomes. Self-efficacy, according to Rowe and Kahn (1998, p134), is "a person's belief in his or her ability to handle various situations". The perception of what is achievable is likely to affect the way age and ageing are viewed, and could be a salient element in the way we choose to live our lives. For example, an individual's perceived locus of control can influence their attitudes toward health, with a consequential influence on health outcomes (Rodin and Langer 1977, Rodin 1986, Seligman 1990, Rawkowski and Hickey 1992). Sdorow (1990, p.460) discusses Rotter's (1966) development of locus of control, being "...the extent to which you believe that you are in control of events in your life or that such events are controlled by factors beyond your control". In addition, Bandura (1994) suggests that the achievement of future goals is made more likely by influencing events over which we have some control, thus emphasising individual autonomy. He further suggests that modelling can assist in teaching strategies to respond to life events.

A third principal foundation of Antonovsky (1987 in Maddox 1991) relates to meaning in life. In the past, there has been much support for the often-expressed view that the need for meaning in life becomes more important as we age (Jung 1963; Erikson 1965; Frankl 1963; Neugarten 1974). However, the amount of time lived, as represented by chronological age, is not proportional to notions of meaning and identity. Neugarten (1977, p.633 in Kaufman 1986, p.18) refers to age as being meaningless, an "empty variable", and regards biological and social events as being more influential upon ageing than time. Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.139) similarly regard increasing age as the "accumulation of experience". However, the response and learning outcomes from experiences can be more significant than mere numerical accumulation of experiences where little learning is achieved. Moments that influence people's lives such as epiphanies or turning points (Denzin 2001) can be significant in individual life changes, and are discussed in detail in Chapter Three. Kaufman (1986, p.151) regards the seeking of meaning from experiences of ageing to be a process of constant reinterpretation, of the

individual viewing him or herself as ageless, and maintains, "Identity is created and recreated over time as a person progresses through the life span". Kaufman (1986) further suggests that the way that events are individually interpreted is critical to ongoing development of identity. Identity is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

The process of ageing can be regarded metaphorically as a means of providing individual meaning outside of restrictions of socialisation (Deshler in Mezirow 1990). In metaphoric terms, Kaufman (1986) discusses ageing as an adventure, while Gibson (2000, p.778) comments, "Viewed as a projected journey through unknown territory with an unknown end, our personal future has quite fascinating possibilities". Ruth and Oberg (1996, p.170) suggest that the way a life is envisaged influences perceptions of self-efficacy in living that life, such as their description of life as a "trapping pit" or as "the bitter life". A further view is as a "job career", involving the constant seeking of accomplishments, suggesting what is envisaged affects the life that is lived. Consequently, Sontag's (1972, p.72) description of advanced age might be negatively influential in the way that life is lived when she states, "It is a shipwreck, no matter with what courage elderly people insist on continuing the voyage".

Meaninglessness can occur from the lack of a sense of meaning in life. Randall and Kenyon (2001, p.7) suggest that for some older people perceptions of powerlessness in society can create "serious problems of identity or meaning". As Frankl (1963, p.121) concludes, in analysing observed inmate behaviour in Nazi concentration camps in the Second World War, "woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on". In an investigation of meaninglessness in the second half of life in Holland, with respondents from 58 to 90 years of age, van Selm and Dittman-Kohli (1998, p.81) found that meaninglessness reflected:

...a lack of goals and an impoverishment of meaning... On the affective level, meaninglessness is far more characterized by dejection-related emotions, than by agitation-related emotions. Alienation from one's self, others, or society appeared to be characteristic for most of the cognitive component of meaninglessness.

Randall and Kenyon (2001, p.8) suggest that a lack of meaning in life can arise from our separation from society as individuals:

...the meaning of life becomes the meaning of *my* life as a unique individual. The process of aging becomes my problem – and perhaps even my *fault* – for not living right. This results in a kind of loneliness, in having no place to be ourselves.

Randall and Kenyon (2001, p.8) further describe the emptiness of much of modern day life as associated with meaninglessness, in particular highlighting a lack of a sense of community, and a constant striving for achievements as a “spiritual malaise”.

A personal sense of meaning in life can take different forms. For Frankl (1963, p.122) it was the lived action of giving that he believed to be fundamental to meaning in life. He stresses:

It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life.

Other meanings include an increased valuing of life (Heikkinen 1996). It may also be related to other determinants such as involvement in a cause or having a goal; accordingly, Lewin-Fetter (2000) advocates that “Passion for a vocation needs to be cultivated and encouraged”. Spiritual beliefs also have some connection to life meaning (Frankl 1963, Wong 1989). Beliefs of the spirit are taken to include religious beliefs, whether or not connected to a formed church. Perls and Silver (1999) refer to the number of people who attend church (in the United States) as being over half of those over sixty-five years of age, illustrating in his view, potential spiritual commitment. Brooks (1994, p.231) refers to meaningfulness in terms of Antonovsky’s salutogenic theory as, “the extent to which one feels that life makes sense emotionally. This aspect incorporates the

idea that challenges can be welcomed rather than perceived as a threat". Meaning in life can also be suggested to reflect satisfaction with life. Campbell and others (1976, in Maddox 1991, p.10) note that there is "...a very useful distinction between satisfaction with life and happiness. Satisfaction refers to the perception of personal goals having been achieved. Happiness is a mood, a positive affective state". In effect, happiness can be thought of as the 'living in the present' dimension of satisfaction, being more transient than satisfaction, though regarded nevertheless as critical to wellbeing, as advocated by Diener et al (1999).

Wisdom has often been associated with meaning and older ages. However, despite a view by younger people that older people have wisdom to offer (White House Conference on Aging 1996a), with Minichiello et al (2000) also suggesting that this be termed as 'sageism', being a respect for older people's views in interactions with younger people, the inevitable attainment of wisdom through years lived would seem unlikely. As Kenyon, Ruth and Mader (1999, p.50) state, "Wisdom is not a natural outcome of living longer, but it does require some level of experience". They further discuss the potential relationship between wisdom and life difficulties and cite the reflection of Scott-Maxwell (1968) that, "The hardness in life I deplore creates the qualities I admire".

Adversity from experiences in life is likely at some time to be experienced by all. However, the personal nature of the response to adversity may generate or develop aspects of personality. According to Burns (1995, p.193), "Personality is the way in which the individual habitually responds to and interacts with their environment." Furthermore, Burns (1995) suggests that personality is described by traits, termed in this study as personality characteristics. Heikkinen (1996) suggests that a positive reflective re-interpretation of adversarial events can occur with ageing. Bandura (1994) maintains that, "beliefs in self-efficacy affect... resilience to adversity and vulnerability to stress and depression".

Meaning to life is an important issue in ageing that is not restricted to older age groups, but applies to people of all chronological ages. Meaning of life is an individual

perception based on life experiences. In discussing a meaning of life Campbell (1988 in Campbell and Moyers 2001), commented, “People say that what we’re seeking is a meaning for life... I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being *alive*!”

Although social wellbeing is an important perspective on the experience of ageing, cultural stereotypical perceptions of age may limit the quality of any extension to life. As a basis for deeper understanding of perspectives of ageing, a framework for understanding influences on the perceptions of ageing is now discussed in terms of concepts of age, theories related to age, as well as examining perceptions of the ageing process such as positive or successful ageing. Two central notions related to the ageing process are then explored in depth. Lifelong learning is discussed as being a critical instrumental process in the ongoing change related to ageing, with both learning and ageing being a lifelong involvement. Attitudinal perspectives related to age are then considered, with the concept of agelessness suggested as a way of addressing crucial changes to restrictive views of ageing.

### **A framework for understanding perceptions of ageing:**

#### **2.7 Concepts of age**

While chronological age has widespread societal usage and influence, there are other salient concepts of age, such as biological age, social age, psychological age, optimal age, identity age, and functional age. Settersten and Mayer (1997) refer to Birren and Cunningham’s (1985) classifications of biological, social and psychological age. Biological age according to Birren and Cunningham (1985, p.8) is an individual’s “...present position with respect to his [or her] potential life span. Thus, an individual’s biological age may be younger or older than his [or her] chronological age”. According to Settersten and Mayer (1997), this view of biological age is made based on bodily functioning. Social age encompasses the way age is viewed within a society. This refers to the uses and restrictions of age within a society, as well as the “roles and habits” (Settersten and Mayer 1997, p.239) an individual displays related to age. Perceptions of

social age can include ages in areas such as life transitions or for the legal ordering of society. Age is deeply entwined within the social fabric of our society and in the societal expectations of individuals. Neugarten and Neugarten (1986, p.400) articulate the interaction between social and chronological age through, "...multiple levels of social and psychological reality that are based on social age, and in modern societies, on calendar age as the marker of social age". Psychological age (Birren and Cunningham 1985) is based on behavioural adaptive capabilities such as thinking and learning capacities. Settersten and Mayer (1997) regard the concepts of biological, social and psychological age as mainly conceptual and are critical in concluding that sufficient evidence is not given to substantiate their usage.

Optimal age is another term used and is referred to as, "...getting the best out of what is possible for as long as possible – physically, cognitively, socially, and psychologically" by Powell (1998, p.6). Optimal ageing, in Powell's view, relates to a concept of full living "...in the context of the inevitable limitations that growing old places on us". Although living to our potential is involved in this concept there is an underlying inherent theme of decline or inevitable reduction of capabilities, as well as the difficulty of knowing what the best is. A further term of ageing, viewed from the individual's perspective, is identity age: subjective views of age, being specifically the age an individual feels or would like to be (Settersten and Mayer 1997).

The way we function in our everyday life is addressed in terms of functional age, and according to Settersten and Mayer (1997, p.255) is regarded as the "ability to adapt to his or her environment". The ability to adapt in the way we function can be affected by other aspects such as life experience (Powell 1998). Individually, functional age could be displayed differently, but an illustration of functional age might be an individual's comparative sporting capabilities at differing ages in the same sporting activity. Nevertheless, again a difficulty is in measurement of the concept.

It is important to note from these diverse ways of classifying age, that whatever way age is labelled, these are still categorisations and, therefore, only carry meaning relative to the



purpose for categorising. The various concepts of age address differing elements related to the ageing process; however, it can be noted that most of these differing concepts of age appear to be concerned with higher chronological ages. The classifications are restrictive by virtue of the often-inferred comparisons with perceived norms of age for each concept, and also by the nature of the label, making each term a bounded one. Nevertheless, the perception of age, in whatever form, is influential on individuals and in society; as Settersten and Mayer (1997, p.242) state, "Elementary ascriptive categories often take on complex social meanings (e.g. influencing attitudes, behaviours, language), and age is no exception".

## 2.8 Chronological age usage

Of the different concepts of age, chronological age is the most commonly understood and used. Chronological age in Western society and many other cultures is used as a means of social organisation (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987, Settersten and Mayer 1997). Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.189) describe the United States as an "age-graded society... [to] tell people what they can and can't do". Explicitly, chronological age is used for ordering of school populations, qualification for voting and a wide range of legal citizenship measures. As Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) state:

Laws establishing age distinctions pervade most areas of life: education, family, housing, entry and exit from various occupations, the allocation of public resources, the extension and denial of benefits, the imposition and the relaxation of legal responsibilities. At both state and federal levels, scores of statutes refer to age.

Also, according to Whitton (2001) there is an insidious labelling process occurring through the provision of date of birth for a diverse range of individual categorisation purposes. This often occurs without the individual necessarily having knowledge as to why notification of age is required, or how such information may be used. It can include providing age in relation to driving licences, credit cards and other assorted financial

transactions including opening a bank account. Also, increasingly it is related to provision of date of birth for use as a personal identification marker in a range of applications such as for telephone purchase and billing transactions, payment of rates or electricity accounts. Despite its administrative application and apparent usefulness in areas such as age of retirement, or for the classification of a mature age learner at university, it can be argued that these processes are also a type of labelling which could be detrimental, in terms of perception by the individual or by others of that label.

A further illustration of inferred age categorisation can be seen in the way the mass media uses age labelling of named individuals. The age of a road accident driver is given when the chronological age is related to an older or younger driver, as though the categorisation inferred the driving behaviour. Continuing to view individuals in these stereotypical ways might also be a key aspect in possible inter-generational conflict through stereotypical expectations.

The concept of chronological age, it is argued, brings with it culturally limiting perceptions that are often based on historically originated ageist stereotypes. A counter-view suggested by Andrews (2000) is that age subjectively is more than a marker, but is part of the lives we have lived. She declares, "I do not see age as an empty container" (p.794). However, while not disputing the role chronological age has played in our lives, whether there has been a beneficial effect from its usage, or whether it has led to restrictions in the way our lives are conducted, is questionable.

Society has traditionally acknowledged chronological age usage in rites of passage. In pre-modern societies, these rites had significance through communal agreement of the standing achieved by departure from a past standing to a present one. Behavioural restrictions, using chronological age as a form of social control, are demonstrated by the following of age norms (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987, Settersten and Mayer 1997, Settersten 1997). Furthermore, Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) highlight the importance of the influence of life transitions. They discuss age norms, based on their earlier research, stating that within "...socially relevant periods, age distinctions become

systematized and rights and responsibilities are distributed according to social age” (p.29).

A salient effect of cultural age norms is the sense of individuals being off-time or on-time (Schroots and Birren 1988). However, with increased flexibility of transitional elements in society there is presently a blurring of age transitions. Neugarten and Neugarten (1986) indicate that changes for individuals in achieving transitions had occurred and that “timetables were losing their cogency” (p.39). Settersten and Hagestad (1996a) and Peterson (1996) further indicate that increased flexibility has occurred in the decades since the original studies by Neugarten, leading to age norms being enacted more as guidelines. Examples of transitional areas include family, education/workplace and health/death (Settersten 1997), and could include ongoing changes in aspects such as the age of women giving birth, the use of 18 instead of 21 as an age marker of societal responsibility, more flexible retirement ages, and the prognosticated omission of retirement as a governmental category (Costello’s super plan eases way to old age 2004). In a cross-cultural study Barak, Mathur, Lee and Zhang (2001) found that gender played no role in personal perceptions of age; however, according to Settersten and Hagestad (1996b) and Settersten (1997), there is more fluidity in transitional ages for women (in the United States) than for men.

There are other allied issues relating to concept of age. For example, stereotyping of particular chronological age stages, such as the “glorification” of youth, has in the discussions of McHugh (2000, p.106) been overtaken by a focus on prolonging the mid-life period. Barak, Mathur, Lee and Zhang (2001) established that people under the age of forty regarded themselves as young, with the implication for this age identification being that their subjects chose to disregard a middle age role. It can also be noted that transitional life changes and events are occurring across age ranges and are not limited to older people (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987). Importantly, the changes have also been responded to by government. An illustration is the initiative by the Australian treasurer Costello to adjust the concept of set ages for retirement payments discussed earlier (Costello’s super plan eases way to old age 2004). As retirement is “institutionalized as a

symbol of productivity” (Baltes and Carstensen 1996, p.400), this has significance in the way changing concepts of age are leading to perceptions of changing roles for individuals.

The evolution from a collective view of life transitions to a more individual progression has lessened the influence of chronological age. Through what can be viewed as individual triggers this has increasingly created individual life courses. Heinz (1996, p.50) regards life course transitions as, “...disengagement from the old status, individual transformation and re-integration in the new status”. However, he further discusses what he terms “individual status passages”, recognising the shift towards individual influence on the life course. Patton (2002) regards the influence of transitions on personal lives as “Multiple passages over a lifetime journey” (p.9).

Changes in life transitions highlight ongoing societal changes. Previously, the more rigid nature of transitions could be viewed as a form of social control; however, changes leading to the more flexible manner in which transitions are now acknowledged indicate a greater individual autonomy in personal lives.

## **2.9 Time and place perspectives**

Time orientation also has considerable relevance in the consideration of ageing as “people’s lives [are] interconnected within time but also through time” (Pearlin, Skaff and McKean 1996, p.249), with differing individual perceptions of time as ageing occurs. Time in childhood may feel as though it is longer than in later years, when time appears in comparison to be faster. As Shenfield (2003, p.926) comments, “As one gets older the years pass in a flash. There is a very good reason for this: 1 day to a 1-year-old is a huge 0.27% of their life, to a centenarian it is but a speck in the totality of experience”. However, this logical view obscures the personal perception of the way time is experienced.

Kenyon and Randall (1997) suggest a different view of time by separating chronological time, referred to as clock time, and internal personal time, referred to as story time. In their view, while chronological time has to be transacted in terms of cultural expectations, such as those linked to age norms as discussed, the way that inner or story time is regarded, and the way that these two elements of time interrelate, are part of a personal perception of ageing resulting in a sense of past, present and future in our lives. “The future that is projected is not simply a picture of what might be, it is our very being, it is a future that we are already, that is based on this present and a particular past” (Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 1999 p.46).

Time perspective may be a further determinant of the way age is viewed by individuals, and can have a detrimental effect on an individual’s lifelong learning by encouraging them to dwell in the past and thus restricting openness to new experiences. Schmotkin (1991, p.243) refers to “time orientation”, being a characteristic of the extent that people of differing ages live in what he refers to as “time zones” of past, present and future:

...older people did seem to attach more satisfaction than younger people to their own pasts than they attached to the present or future. Over the lifespan, the past surpassed the present in importance at about age 51, and at age 66, the past surpassed the future on satisfaction measures.

McHugh (2003) discusses ageing in terms of place. He suggests that apart from the concept of the body ageing, there is emplacement of ageing, not only in a global sense but also in the place inhabited. He declares, “Who you ‘are’ is related to where you live and the space and places you traverse” (p.169). He discusses how a view of ageing can be different in terms of a retirement belt in Arizona with its perception of timeless scenery, compared to a frail old age in a poorer city neighbourhood. He suggests that if emplacement of ageing is important, then the image presented in commercialised settings such as retirement homes is one of subtle anti-ageing and represents “an impossible ideal” (McHugh 2003, p.180), and furthermore propagates ageism (McHugh 2000). While place and older ageing have been synonymous in the past with withdrawal to older

residential placement, place is being viewed presently with more flexibility by means of the perceived image of place in ageing changing (Rowles 1994). The concept of emplacement in ageing is a further useful means of assisting understanding of the societal relationship and usage of age.

### **2.10 Theories related to age**

A further important influence on understanding of perceptions of ageing is through theories related to age. The way ageing is, and has been, viewed in society is often expressed through theories of ageing. In this section, historical theoretical development related to ageing is discussed, as well as the perceived responsibilities of older age attainment inherent in discontinuity theory and gerotranscendence. Theories of age that focus on continuity and activity are then outlined before discussing the influence of theories on perceptions of the ageing process. In particular, the concept of successful ageing is focused upon as part of positive ageing. The mask of ageing theory is described as a prevalent and often positively perceived view of ageing. Discussion of the theories mentioned is followed by a summary of recent ageing perceptions.

Historically, ageing has been viewed in terms of ongoing decline with opportunities for growth in areas such as wisdom (Hendricks and Achenbaum 1999). The life cycle was seen as stages to move through, and in a notable example Rousseau (1762/1974) referred to the adherence to life cycles in educating Emile, with emphasis placed upon the educator in creating the student.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, views of ageing were increasingly based on developmental stages of life. Life stage and life cycle theories of ageing reinforced perceptions of age developments being uniform for all, and that, as reported by Estes (1979), there is a difference between age groups. Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development (1965) suggested that eight life stages were followed in a mainly systematic developmental order. Erikson (1965) believed that each stage of development was entered by means of critical steps, turning points catalysing entry to the next stage. Of

the eight stages of development, the first six encompassed birth to early adulthood. The seventh was designated as Middle Adulthood, being familial and societal concern, and the eighth regarded the Ageing Years as a time where integrity versus despair were conflicted. Erikson (1965) regarded the period after young adulthood as only two stages. The views of Erikson (1965) can be seen as being restrictive to individuals during the period he connotes as 'Ageing Years'. In terms of increasing longevity, his limitations on adult developmental stages meant that there is often a considerable number of years to reflect on having "taken care of things and people" and "adapted himself to triumphs and disappointments adherent to being" (p.259). The implication is of being fulfilled from life and preparing for death.

There is a growing acceptance, even among those who categorise age in distinct stages, that it is increasingly difficult to state the points, or ages, of entry to each stage. Wilson (2001, p.471) contends that, "old age exists as a definite stage, even though it has fluid boundaries and is a many-faceted and dynamic concept". The concept of fluidity between stages is extended further by Neugarten and Neugarten (1987 in Neugarten 1996, p.73) who maintain, "distinctions between life periods are blurring in today's society".

Other support in more recent times for age categorisation stage-based theories has included increased emphasis on flexibility of entry for older people. Andrews (1999 and 2000) and Gibson (2000) represent the higher chronological ages as a distinct stage. However, Bytheway (2000, p.783) argues against this notion partly in terms of the implied ageism inherent in age-categorisation, and consequently on how an older stage is designated. He suggests, "No matter how scientific we try to be, the criteria we might settle upon will essentially be 'arbitrary' with some people deemed 'just old' and others 'just not quite'". Lifespan or life development theories can be held to reinforce ageist viewpoints through categorisation of expectations for particular age periods.

Two theories that continue to view older ages as a stage with perceived inherent responsibilities are disengagement theory and gerotranscendence. Disengagement theory posits that our main aim as we age is to disengage from what has gone before, both in

terms of ourselves and from others (Cumming and Henry 1961, Estes 1979, Maddox 1991). In effect, it is to accept ageing as being a period of reconciliation with the past, in acknowledgement of perceived symptoms of decline as ageing advances, and as a precursor to eventual death. Disengagement theory, according to Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.46), suggests that "The main task of old age is letting go", by advocating that there is a need to release life engagement such as occupations and social involvement. However, disengagement theory relates to older ages, and in that sense assumes older age as a stage in life. By focusing on the past, the impact of the present and the future is likely to be lessened.

Tornstam (1999, p.11) discusses his theory of gerotranscendence as a reconstruction of disengagement theory. He defines gerotranscendence as "the final stage in a natural process moving towards maturation and wisdom". In particular, the theory is related to a search for meaning at older chronological ages. His theory has some similarity with Erikson's (1965) eighth stage of ego integrity versus despair; however, he contends that there is a major difference in perspective from Erikson's stage based on reflection of the past, with gerotranscendence, according to Tornstam (1999, p.11), being "more of looking forward and outward".

The attainment of maturity or wisdom is often attributed to people of older chronological ages (Erikson 1965, Tornstam 1999), as discussed briefly earlier. Maturity is often viewed as a marker of 'moving on' into a definitive older stage of life towards attaining wisdom. The display of wisdom in a younger person is popularly described as being 'wise beyond their years,' as though wisdom were limited to older ages. However, the extent of an individual's being wise or mature would be difficult to predict from their chronological age, as the response to life experiences is variable and not age-based (Kenyon, Ruth and Mader 1999). Furthermore, wisdom would be recognisable only in relation to a behaviour or action where a subjective interpretation was made. The idea of all older people being wise or mature is unlikely and raises the question of potential causality and extent.



It could be contended that these characteristics are not universal for people of a particular chronological age grouping, and that the perception of the display of wisdom or of maturity could be related to any age. For example, if maturity was designated as a criterion of wisdom, at what age does one theoretically attain maturity and how is this maturity demonstrated? Although various conditions could be attributed to potential factors in maturity, such as becoming a moral agent or as a level of taking responsibility, their specific linkage to a particular age group can be questioned.

Continuity theory (Atchley 1989, 1993) and activity theory suggest that the personally lived past is inherent in the personally lived present, and that older age is not a distinct stage but part of a continuum of life experiences. Atchley (1993, p.15) suggests two notions, firstly that there is an internal component, “the development and persistence over time of mental constructs about who we are, what we are capable of, and what is satisfying to us”. Secondly, there is an external component that relates to the activities we pursue, with continuity of life experiences maintained by continuance of some activities (Atchley 1993, Herzog and Marcus in Bengtson and Schaie 1999). Importantly, continuity theory suggests that the identity is in the process of ongoing change incorporating what has gone before, and rejects the notion of older age as a separate stage in life.

Activity theory is influenced by continuity theory (Atchley 1989). Activity theory advocates continued participation in life through personal physical and cognitive involvement and interactions with others in society (Havighurst and Albrecht 1953), in particular that through activity the self continues to change (Herzog and Marcus 1999). This theory is often popularly alluded to in the saying ‘use it or lose it’, and is posited to improve cognitive vitality (Fillit et al 2002). On the other hand, Andrews (1999, p.304) somewhat ironically describes activity theory as a requirement to, “stay active and keep impending depression at bay”.

Activity theory is influential in terms of what is regarded as active ageing. Minichiello et al (2000) suggest that by active ageing older people present themselves differently from

others as a means of demonstrating individuality. Older people by being active see in themselves, and demonstrate to others, a resistance to being viewed as stereotypically passive, in what they deem as a contradictory view to negative stereotypes. Actions include:

Maintaining intellectual challenges and stimulation, remaining physically fit and eating a healthy diet, engaging in preventive health screening, acting and thinking 'young', maintaining supportive networks, having a sense of belonging, undertaking activities they enjoy and being flexible about participating in activities. (pp.273-4)

Activity and continuity theory have strongly influenced perceptions of the ageing process in recent times, with terms often used in the literature related to concepts of the experience of ageing. Terms often referred to generically as positive ageing include, 'successful ageing', 'ageing well', and 'productive ageing'. The notion of successful, positive ageing is not prescriptive, nor limited solely to the autonomy of the individual (Baltes and Carstensen 1996), and has, as previously discussed, considerable cultural and societal influences on ageing.

Successful ageing is a term that has widespread recognition and can be held to incorporate aspects of both continuity and activity theory. Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.49) state that, "successful aging means just what it says – aging well, which is very different from not aging at all. The three main components of successful aging are avoiding disease and disability, maintaining mental and physical function, and continuing engagement with life". Fisher and Specht (1999) comment on the benefits of successful ageing by stressing the linkage between successful ageing involvements and creativity enhancement. As Kirkwood (1999, p.11) affirms:

The challenge is to age as successfully as we can. For society, the challenge of successful ageing is a paramount issue touching on all aspects of life – social, economic, medical and spiritual. For the individual, the challenge is to reach old

age in optimum health and to develop the resources and attitudes to preserve independence and quality of life for as long as possible.

Criticism of the concept of successful ageing is made in terms of later life frailty and potential disability. Robine et al (2001, p.416) raise concerns that advanced ageing can be a time where “significant physiological deterioration is taking place”. They suggest that the concept of successful ageing can give a sense of inauthenticity concerning the difficulties of ageing. However, successful ageing is not suggested as a panacea of ageing, but as a beneficial and often autonomous approach to ageing.

Nevertheless, while successful ageing has been discussed as the basis for an outcome from ageing, the concept of being successful inevitably encompasses the concept of failing. Is it possible to fail at ageing? Failing signifies that in some way we fall short of what was sought, but in what sense could failing at ageing be viewed? Is there a criterion for success at a particular age or ages, for a particular person or for a particular situation in a particular place? It is clear that for some people there may be difficulties in areas such as economically or perhaps through health difficulties that prevent, as Biggs (1999) maintains, the opportunities for successful ageing to be available for all. As individuals within our own individual process of ageing, our experiences are exceptional to us. As Biggs (2002, p.9) suggests, “There may be something unique that ageing gives us... it may allow ‘success’ to be based on ageing itself, within its own terms of reference”.

Many important aspects in ageing well are within the locus of control of the individual. Ageing well in Western societies, according to Maddox (1991, p.10), involves “an active lifestyle with emphasis on functional autonomy”. He suggests that this involves personal choice, and is most important amongst older people. Earlier discussion promoted physical and cognitive activities as being inherent in successful ageing. A further example of aspects of an active lifestyle is incorporated into the concept of productive ageing; focus is on an older person approach, and the emphasis is on involvement in leisure activities, and paid and unpaid community activities (Kerschner and Pegues 1998). This approach views older adults as a useful resource to society as well as assisting older people to

develop positive thinking related to outcomes of social and community involvement. One state in Australia, Tasmania, has sought to address the way ageing is viewed through “The Tasmanian Plan for Positive Ageing 2000-2005” (Department of Health and Human Services 1999). This plan relates amongst its key principles that “Ageing is a life-long positive process” and that “Positive ageing relies on the actions of individuals, community, including businesses and government”, re-affirming the role of lifelong learning and of learning communities within this area, which will be addressed later.

Baltes and Baltes (1993, p.5) refer to a multicriteria approach to successful ageing, including many common characteristics frequently emerging in successful ageing research such as “Length of life, biological health, mental health, cognitive efficacy, social competence and productivity, personal control and life satisfaction”. Baltes and Baltes (1993) discuss their development of a selective optimisation with compensation (SOC) model as being based on individual goal attainment. This is achieved by adaptation of individual capabilities to attain personal goals in areas such as physical capabilities or aspects of personal autonomy with a process of selection, compensation and optimisation advocated. This theory suggests that individual autonomy is enacted through selection of goals to be attained, and success relies on the use of personal resources such as time or energy. Further resources such as those associated with resilience would also assist in achieving chosen aims. However, there is strongly implied within this theory the notion of making the best of inevitable decline; it infers a downward adjustment in terms of what is chosen to be achieved. In response to this sense of decline, the question is raised as to the time of life when this “readjustment of individual goals” (Baltes and Carstensen 1996, p.407) occurs.

McHugh (2003, p.180) offers criticism of positive views of ageing. He feels that positive responses are offered in an attempt to balance the negativity of stereotypes of older people. He suggests:

So-called positive views signify cloaked denials and repressions of the facts of human ageing and old age, are rife with happy delusions that adulate youth and productive adulthood, and fail to respond to meaning in the third age and beyond.

He contends further that positive views of ageing have been used to commercialise the unattainable. The advertising of retirement facilities by means of upbeat images of ageing is viewed as being in contradiction to his concept of reality (2003, p.180): "Decline and death lurk just below the surface, forming a web of repression and denial that innervates agelessness as a cultural ideal".

However, McHugh's views can certainly be refuted. Firstly, his comments target the process of ageing as being in stages with being older represented as a third age, a separate stage in life different from others, as though somewhere a definite line has been crossed. Also, ironically his view is by inference one of negativity, viewing the process of decline in ageing – and death lurking – as a natural state, a view discussed earlier as being stereotypically ageist. Furthermore, while commercialised images of ageing may or may not be falsely represented, the issue of successful ageing precedes, rather than being driven by any commercial uses or concerns.

The 'mask of ageing' is a further theory that is often regarded as being encompassed within the area of positive ageing. Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) propose that with ageing a splitting of mind and body, similar to Cartesian views, occurs with the ageing body viewed as being separate from the persona of the mind. The notion was earlier introduced by Ryle (1949 in Gibson 2000) as 'the ghost in the machine' and further discussed by Kaufman (1986) as the mind element representing an unageing self, being in her terms 'ageless'.

The ageing body is implied to represent a declining physical appearance, with an entrapped mind. Essentially, as McHugh (2003, p.169) contends, "a person's coherent sense of (youthful) self is masked or hidden beneath an ageing face and body". Biggs (2002, p.3) comments, "the ageing body becomes a cage from which a younger self-

identity cannot escape... An endgame emerges with older people being at war with themselves, an internalised battle between a desire to express oneself and the ageing body". Furthermore, the mentioning of a 'younger' or 'youthful spirit' (Andrews 1999) in reference to this theory pre-supposes attributes of a preferential age, rather than simply a spirit or mind that is accepted for what it is.

The concept of a mask suggests concealment of some kind and raises the question of whether authenticity and genuineness are being demonstrated. Biggs (2002) maintains, "Authenticity denotes a degree of self-integrity. Genuineness expresses its manifestation in terms of communication to others". While it is unlikely that different individuals will view their personal response to their own ageing similarly, the authentic individual experience is likely to be of importance in the way a life is lived. Authentic experience in ageing could be regarded as influential to identity development in our response to, and self-reflection upon the experiences of life, particularly in terms of what Biggs (1999) refers to as authenticity of thoughts, feelings and actions.

The debate over theories of ageing further emphasises the importance of developing a response to a wide range of ageing issues. This debate will assist in providing the deeper, more knowledgeable understanding necessary for potential policy formation and personal implementation to be effective, as well as for societal views and attitudes to be examined. Recent debate has moved away from the search for a theory applicable to all. As Birren (1999, p.468) summarises, "At present we face a field that has a mountain of information but little integration across disciplines and phenomena".

Changes in perceptions of age and ageing allied to changes in society from longevity have ensured that approaches to ageing are re-considered. In effect, all theories of ageing can be viewed as an attempt to explain the individual patterning of lives, with individual events of experience within the process of ageing, and in this sense in a narrative gerontological perspective as stories of ageing (Kenyon and Randall 1999, Randall and Kenyon 2001). As Tennant and Pogson (1995, p.97) conclude:

There is a growing recognition ... that development needs to be understood, not only in terms of normative age-graded stages but also in terms of nonnormative life events. The influence of historical events and social movements is also acknowledged, so that development is conceived as following complex patterns that differ between individuals, rather than a simple linear progression through a relatively fixed sequence of stages toward a common goal.

Two key influences related to individual experience of the ageing process, lifelong learning and attitudinal perspectives related to age, are now explored in depth. The concept of agelessness is then explored as a way of addressing necessary changes to restrictive views of age and ageing.

**Key influences related to the ageing process and the concept of agelessness:**

**2.11 Lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning may be viewed as an important area of relevance to experiences of ageing. Settersten and Lovegreen (1998, p.506) highlight the complexities of the interactions between the individual and society in responding to lifelong learning opportunities, and discuss the potential restrictions on experiences of learning throughout adult life, to lives becoming:

“chronologised” (bound to age, and in which lifetime is of central concern),  
“institutionalized” (structured by social institutions and by the state and its policies), and “standardized” (the degree to which their life patterns exhibit regularity, especially with respect to the timing of key life events and transitions).

These influences are discussed in terms of potential rigidity or flexibility, and also in terms of the differing contexts of family, work and educational areas, as well as gender differences. Settersten and Lovegreen (1998) view the creation of policies enabling flexibility as being the most useful course to pursue for the benefit of opportunities to learners, thereby limiting the comprehensive range of potential barriers, including age

biases. The need for flexibility in response to influences on learning is evident in terms of the societal changes in social, technological, and economic areas, which have ensured that individuals will face considerable changes over their lives.

For individuals there is an increasing need for flexibility to new challenges. Not only is this necessary in the experience of our own ageing or the personal events of our lives, but also due to, as Field (2000, p.17) emphasises, "...the remarkable impact of new information and communications technologies (ICTS)", the use of information technology being a learning need identified by the respondents to SEETRC (1997). However, flexibility in understanding and use of new technology is only one element of a response to change. As Gorard, Selwyn and Madden (2003, p.281) caution, participation in ICTS "should on no account be assumed to be a universal panacea to achieving a truly inclusive 'learning society'". King and Schneider (1993, p.355) suggest that:

... since changes are succeeding one another with unprecedented speed, the challenge is not to adapt once and for all to a new situation, but to live in a permanent state of adaptation facing uncertainty and the new dimensions of complexity facing our world.

It is posited that lifelong learning is essential in adaptation to change, and that occurrences either within or from outside the locus of control of the individual will necessitate a learning response. For example, societal changes in the area of labour mobility in employment have altered the concept of job security in recent years, and will affect individuals' occupations during the life course (Candy et al 1994, Field 2000, Cornford 2002, Edwards, Ranson and Strain 2002). In Australia in 2000, 16 per cent of all people aged 15-69 years, who worked during the year, changed their employment (A.B.S. 2000c).

A further illustration of changes within society has occurred in life transitions in recent decades (Neugarten 1972, Neugarten and Neugarten 1987, Settersten and Hagestad 1996b), as discussed earlier. Other influences from outside of the national community are



in a range of potential changes within society enacted through globalisation. Giddens (2002, p.7) suggests that, "...we are being propelled into a global order that no one fully understands, but which is making its effect on all of us." He categorises risk as external risk, such as that arising from nature, and manufactured risk, that arising from societal and globalised changes. His concern is mainly with the escalation of manufactured risk and he (2002, p.28) summarises, "...there is a new riskiness to risk." Beck (1994) defines the risk society as, "...a phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological and individual risks created by the momentum of innovation increasingly elude the control and protective institutions of industrial society".

Consequently, there could be a temptation to perceive the immeasurable nature of the forces of globalisation as being personally uncontrollable, resulting in perceptions of individual inconsequentiality. As Edwards et al (2002, p.525) confirm, "Insecurity, uncertainty, unpredictability and exclusion have all been identified as pervasive features of contemporary life, associated with a number of structural changes in society".

Furthermore, according to Usher (1999, p.69), long-established structural frames of reference have become challenged:

Shaped by the moral horizons of the life chances appropriate to one's class, family, neighbourhood, religion, ethnicity, sex and age, these frames of reference provided a stable social identity even whilst imposing strict limits on the freedom to develop lifestyles, desires and aspirations that transcended those horizons.

However, an alternative view is suggested by Edwards (1994, p.9) as, "...different ways in which the local is expressed". Giddens (1990) maintains that the homogenisation inherent in globalisation has created a demand for local autonomy and identity. Usher (1999, p.69) further discusses two important aspects of Beck's (1992) concept of the risk society:

...the unprecedented growth of globalised and unabating dangers and hazards – ‘risks’ which are unbounded by either time or space, which affect everyone but for which no one can be held accountable... the other consequence of modernity is its individualizing thrust... Consequently, the choices to be made in directing lives become more and more the responsibility of individuals – people must reflexively construct their own biographies.

As a result, individual and personal insecurity is not viewed as inevitable in the risk society.

The contrast between the restrictive but assured frames of reference and the ongoing uncertainty of change in the ‘risk society’ proposed by Beck (1992) has, according to Usher (1999, p.69), resulted in difficult choices for planning our own life courses. Usher suggests that, “identity necessarily becomes a matter of reflexivity or self-reflection”, with the effect that individual “reflexive biographies” are created. Giddens (1994, p.7) emphasises the need for individual actions in response to the variety of change occurring and suggests that, “A world of intensified reflexivity is a world of clever people... individuals more or less have to engage with the wider world if they are to survive it.” This choice of engagement by individuals is referred to by Beck (2000, p.150) as “The individualism of self-determined engagement.” Consequently, there is a need for ongoing, lifelong learning, often from our everyday lives, through informal learning.

However, while there are changes occurring in a range of areas, the ways that individuals manage or adjust to change would appear to be important in their lifelong learning. As Fullan (1993, p.135) states, “We do not have a choice between change and non-change, but we do have a choice about how we respond”. The importance of a reflexive response to change is emphasised by Edwards (1997, p.24), who states that, “Change, often unpredictable in its consequences, is endemic therefore to the contemporary world.” As a means of response, Fullan (1993, 15) further refers to “lifelong inquiry” in discussing the capacity to change, where “Inquiry means internalising norms, habits and techniques for continuous learning”. Seligman (1994, p.4) concludes, “What can we change about

ourselves? What can we not?" Bandura (1982) refers to "self efficacy", incorporating a positive sense of belief in addressing change. Lifelong learning would appear to require not only engagement but also positive adjustment to change. Bennetts (2003, p.457) advocates positive expectations and forward planning as being beneficial in managing change:

...individuals' transitions appear to have been sustained over the years by the knowledge that change is possible, necessary, and rewarding. The transitions evolved through a cycle of evaluation of circumstances, assessment of learning need, and adaptation of the present pattern of life required to achieve the new goal.

Lifelong learning has received considerable attention both internationally and nationally for a number of years. Notably, the Faure UNESCO Report (1972) advocated a humanistic view of lifelong learning, with the concept seen as encompassing a wide range of personal through to government provided learning. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) international conference for 1994, entitled *Learning Beyond Schooling* (1994), focused upon lifelong learning and gave emphasis to global attention on lifelong learning. Australians Chapman and Aspin (1997, p.4) refer to the "immense importance" of lifelong learning given by many international governments as a basis for addressing societal problems; for example, Paye (1996, p.4) contends that lifelong learning is crucial to address "the gathering momentum of globalisation". Within Australia, interest has been demonstrated through many government and state policy initiatives, such as *Lifelong Education revisited – Commission for the Future* (Butler 1989), *Beyond Cinderella – A report of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (SEETRC)* (1997), which endorsed lifelong learning as being vital to the creation of a learning society, and *Learning Together*, a policy initiative from the Department of Education, Tasmania (2000), further encouraging focus on lifelong learning.

The term lifelong education is often used to refer to formal education and training, for example, in the International Journal of Lifelong Education. Lifelong learning is a broader term, encompassing formal and informal learning, including learning from experience. This study adopts this broad definition.

The keystone UNESCO Report on Education for the Twenty-First century (1972/1996b) advocated that lifelong learning be based on what they term the four pillars of knowledge entitled: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be:

These four pillars of knowledge cannot be anchored solely in one phase in a person's life or in a single place. There is a need to re-think when in people's lives education should be provided, and the fields that such education should cover. The periods and fields should complement each other and be interrelated in such a way that all people can get the most out of their own specific educational environment all through their lives.

However, it can be noted that the report accentuated the importance of formal education systems in the provision of lifelong education (as distinct from lifelong learning), and further commented:

...nothing can replace the formal education system, where each individual is introduced to the many forms of knowledge. There is no substitute for the teacher-pupil relationship, which is underpinned by authority and developed through dialogue... It is the responsibility of the teacher to impart to the pupil the knowledge that humankind has acquired about itself and about nature and everything of importance that it has created and invented.

The report not only emphasised formal education, but was also prescriptive in the preferred mode of transmission, having the teacher "impart to the student". This mode is closely aligned to the direct instruction model (Joyce and Weil 1996), and might be viewed by many educators as a very limited view of lifelong learning.

However, while lifelong learning is a commonly used term, its meaning is often unclear (Aspin and Chapman 2000). In past decades the Faure Report (1972) influenced the notion of lifelong learning (also often termed in a narrower sense, as previously mentioned, lifelong education) as being learning for the whole of life; a familiar description of the term is learning 'from the cradle to the grave'.

Brown (2000a, p.6) relates that, "The key 1990s reports on lifelong learning are influenced by a broader mix of economic, employment, social, cultural and educational objectives reflecting the uncertain and rapidly changing contemporary times". Increasingly, governments and policy makers use the term 'lifelong learning' as regarding formal and vocational education rather than encompassing a wider spectrum to include informal learning. The Tasmanian policy document Learning Together (Department of Education 2000, p.7) declares that, "Through lifelong learning we adapt to changes in the nature of work and make sure that all our businesses are learning organisations that are able to respond flexibly and effectively to changing circumstances".

The aim of the 1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning was given as, "personal development of individuals and their integration into working life and society" (Peck 1996), accentuating the direction of the learning being encouraged towards vocational objectives. Similarly, Duke (2000, p.67) refers to United Kingdom aims for lifelong learning as being government influenced with "...tendencies towards both training for economic ends and access and social inclusion". As Field (2000, p.5) states, "...lifelong learning has in several European nations become a convenient political shorthand for the modernizing of education and training systems." Field is suggesting there is more to lifelong learning than a limited view of formal education and training. Ecclestone (1999, p.332) asserts, "policy still focuses on learning for economic competitiveness", a view confirmed by the United Kingdom Dearing Report (1997), which emphasises the citizenship, vocational and economic benefits of the learning society.

Merrill (1999b, p.11) refers to the economic basis, and general agreement by governments and organisational policy documents, of the value of lifelong learning, observing that:

Lifelong learning is generally perceived as a good thing by governments, policy-makers and educationalists. It is now embedded, uncritically, within political and academic discourses in Europe... Political support for lifelong learning by European governments and the European Commission rests on economic arguments: lifelong learning is essential if Europe is to survive economically within a globalised world.

Noticeably, while lifelong learning has been emphasised as being critical in addressing change, it has also been utilised by governments in terms of vocational aims. As Edwards (1999, p.31) affirms, "...earning and learning are increasingly fused". He further (1999, p.34) contends that:

...lifelong learning has been adopted both at the national and supra-national levels as a framework for policy and practice, increasingly with the espoused normative goal of supporting the development of a learning society, where the latter is primarily, though not solely, framed within human capital theory.

In recent times, the impetus towards addressing lifelong learning has been in response to societal challenges brought about by change. Trorey, Cullingford, and Cooper (1999) observe that "...a concept of personal development for its own sake has been replaced by greater instrumentalism; with honing skills for the sake of society". Brunt (1999) discusses the increasing employer involvement in lifelong learning as "the lifelong learning agenda gathers momentum".

A restrictive description of lifelong learning as being bounded by categorisations that lessen the full scope of lifelong learning is contested in this study. Consequently, for the purpose of this study, lifelong learning is defined as:

A complex and multi-faceted informal and formal learning process. It begins at birth, and is carried on through informal learning, as well as compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training. It continues throughout life, through informal and formal learning experiences, activities and enjoyment in the home, in the workplace, in universities and colleges, and in other educational, social and cultural agencies, institutions and settings within the community (Adapted from Aspin and Chapman 2000, p.16).

It is posited here that learning from life experiences, without limitation as to the situated source of the learning experience, is included in lifelong learning. Field (2000, p.1) discusses lifelong as "...the recognition that learning may stretch out over a lifetime", while Renshaw (2002, p.1) maintains that "learning is everywhere, it envelops us and pervades our everyday life. We are learning constantly from our observations, our conversations, our experiences, from our workplaces, from incidental occurrences and contingencies, as well as from instruction within formal institutions".

Lived experience can provide many opportunities for lifelong learning. Tennant and Pogson (1995) discuss the importance of lived experience in contrast to created experience. Particular benefits are suggested in social justice areas relating to personal change. Critical reflective practice related to focused awareness of the meaningful understanding of experiences is suggested by Mezirow (1990) (discussed in more depth later in this section) and by Tennant and Pogson (1995). Edwards and Miller (2000, p.130) support a critical reflective view in regard to the difficulties for lifelong learners in negotiating their own learning from everyday experience. They state, "Lifelong learners may be conceived as being in a constant process of negotiating the complexity and ambivalence of postmodern times".

Learning from change through life experiences, such as the impact of critical incidents and turning point moments, is of further importance. Merrill (1999) highlights the impact

of critical incidents and turning points as learning events in ongoing personal change. Critical incidents have been recognised as notable in response to learning for many years (Flanagan 1954), and in adult education as a valuable focus for reflective understanding from lived experience (Alheit 1992, Beattie 1995, 1996, Perea and Morrison 1997, Munro 1998).

West (1996, p.23) also emphasises the importance of moments that have an impact on life by discussing a turning point moment in his own life. In a public solo singing performance viewed by his mother, he was unable to reach a high note. His mother's embarrassed response was memorable to him. He commented, "I wished there had been a hole in the ground to swallow me up, I felt so ashamed". Her emotional response led to his comment that "Part of me shrivelled and died in that instance". West (1996) emphasises the effect of turning points in lived experience being a catalyst for learning and change in people's lives. Doray and Belanger (2002, p.3) refer to "...critical transition points in both the occupational life-course and in the learning biography of individuals" where individuals respond using their own learning practices. The impact of turning point moments and epiphanies is discussed later in more depth within the Chapter Three 'Existential ethnography' section.

Although lifelong learning is often a key aim of education policy and subsequently affects formal institutional learning, teaching methodology, and curriculum content, how these aims are to be achieved is not clear. For one sector of formal education, universities, Candy et al (1994, p.32) suggest that an important way of assisting students to become lifelong learners is by providing post-graduate studies, by offering non-award continuing education, and "...arguably most vital, is through conducting their programs in such a way that graduates are enabled and encouraged to continue learning throughout their lives". Candy et al (1994) refer to the provision of opportunity for learning in formal courses, but emphasise that providing the stimulus to the individual continuing to choose learning from life experiences is a more long-lasting motivation to achievement of lifelong learning aims than formal education.



The limitation of viewing learning as comprising mainly formal learning is patently restrictive in the overall context of the learning that occurs for any one individual in their life. A wider view to the systemic limitations of lifelong learning was made by Faure et al (1972, p.69):

Is this not the time to call for something quite different in education systems?  
Learning to live, learning to learn, so as to be able to absorb new knowledge all through life, learning to think freely and critically; learning to love the world and make it more human; learning to develop in and through creative work.

Eraut (2000) contends that there is increasing acceptance of the role of the learning from many different sources within a person's life, and discusses the constituents of what he terms non-formal learning. This term views implicit learning as being learning without conscious consideration, reactive learning where spontaneity to the learning situation occurs, and deliberative learning as utilising choice of engagement and learning response.

However, for the purpose of this study the term informal learning, being a key component of lifelong learning, is used to encompass and extend the three areas of non-formal learning suggested by Eraut (2000). It is felt that classifying specific aspects of learning into the categories Eraut suggests would not be beneficial to discourse of the often inter-related and over-lapping nature of informal learning that can occur. For example, learning from a chosen learning situation could also initiate a spontaneous response and a further understanding on reflection, all occurring within a range of situated contexts and not necessarily consistent with the bounded categories Eraut (2000) suggests. Analysis by separation of the inter-related and situated aspects in non-formal terms is also not felt, in this study, to be necessarily beneficial to further understanding of the learning that has occurred, as the bounding of non-formal learning could be restrictive to consideration of any other learning outside of the categorisations of Eraut (2000).

Informal learning can be viewed as fundamental to learning from experiences throughout life. Merrill (1999b, p.15) suggests that the present European emphasis on formal lifelong

learning needs extending to incorporate informal learning areas. She states, "Discussions on lifelong learning mostly refer to learning in formal contexts or further or higher education. Informal learning is ignored yet learning which takes place in the family, community and workplace is an important aspect of adult life."

Despite informal learning often being seen, especially in policy documents, as relatively insignificant in comparison to formal education and training programmes (Gorard, Fevre and Rees 1999, Merrill 1999b), nevertheless, a clearer differentiation can be observed by the division of formal and informal learning. Informal learning can be situated in a wide variety of life experience contexts. Johnson (1998, p.21) points out that, "...the less formal settings of the home, the workplace, the community and society are integral parts of the learning environment too". Informal learning can also be viewed as including learning from the following of individual interests to some interactions within social settings, or community organisations (McGivney 2000). Harrison (2000) further emphasised the importance of informal teachers that people accessed as part of informal learning involving others, within learning communities. Candy et al (1994, p.41) also stress the importance of learning informally as part of a wide range of learning opportunities, "...that great sea of personal inquiry through which we express and enhance our human longing to be, to become and to belong".

Informal learning can occur through a wide range of everyday experiences. Ironside (1989 in Moreland 1999, p.164) defines informal education as, "...the lifelong process whereby all individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and from the educative influences and resources in their environment". Informal learning can be viewed as an extension of the range of learning possible through formal learning (Edwards and Miller 2000), and can "enhance individual experience and capability in ways not directly open to instrumental control and manipulation" (Edwards et al 2002, p.529). Informal learning is thus a key component of lifelong learning.

While consideration is given to the importance of lifelong learning, understanding of descriptors of lifelong learners is often stated in general terms. NBEET (1996) refers to

the characteristics of lifelong learners, with an emphasis on learning from structured education and training programmes, as well as a concept of “public learning” related to an awareness of a broad range of citizenship issues, as being the acquisition of “The necessary skills and attitudes for learning, especially literacy and numeracy skills; the confidence to learn, including a sense of engagement with the education and training system, and willingness and motivation to learn” (p.3).

Cornford (2002) discusses the importance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies as learning-to-learn strategies essential to lifelong learning. Metacognitive strategies include reflection and self-knowledge as a learner, while cognitive strategies include memory storage processes and organisation strategies. According to Weinstein and Mayer (1994, p.17), “A cognitive learning strategy is a plan for orchestrating cognitive resources, such as attention and long-term memory to help reach a learning goal”. However, Cornford’s learning-to-learn strategies are primarily focused on lifelong learning related to formal educational settings and are therefore restrictive in terms of the present study’s definition.

While general characteristics of lifelong learners are discussed by others, such as those related to the four pillars of knowledge (UNESCO 1996b, NBEET 1996), a profile of characteristics that are representative of lifelong learners is discussed by Kearns (1999), based on a lifelong learning profile developed by Candy et al (1994, pp.43-44) in terms of effective learners in undergraduate education. The characteristics stated as a profile of the lifelong learner (Kearns 1999) are:

#### An inquiring mind and curiosity

- Has a sense of curiosity and question asking
- Has a love of learning and discovery
- Has reflective habits
- Can apply strategies to enhance creative resourcefulness

#### Helicopter vision

- Has a sense of the interconnectedness of things

- Is able to apply systems perspectives and 'see the big picture'
- Has the capacity for strategic thinking
- Has a vision that goes beyond own job or field of study

#### A repertoire of learning skills

- Has learning-to-learn strategies
- Knows own strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning styles
- Has a range of strategies for learning in various contexts
- Is able to learn from others in teams
- Understands different kinds of learning

#### A commitment to personal mastery and on-going development

- Has motivation, a desire for learning throughout life, and confidence in own learning ability
- Has a commitment to on-going personal and career development
- Has self-esteem and a positive concept of self as capable and autonomous
- Has the capacity to deal with change

#### Interpersonal effectiveness

- Has the ability to learn from others in teams
- Has the ability to give and receive feed-back in team learning situations
- Has a group orientation and can contribute to team learning
- Has cultural understanding and can learn in situations involving cultural diversity in Australia and overseas

#### Information literacy

- Has the ability to locate, evaluate, manage and use information in a range of contexts
- Can use modern information technologies for these purposes
- Has a good sense of knowledge acquisition and generation, and can contribute to turning workplace learning into shared knowledge

While emphasising that individuals might exemplify these characteristics in different ways and in a range of educational contexts, Candy et al (1994, p.44) maintain that “overarching all these various attributes is the ability to act strategically as learning needs and opportunities arise”.

Kearns' (1999) adaptation of the original findings from Candy et al (1994) explicates the descriptors in more detail. Kearns has extended Candy's 'A sense of positive agency' into 'A commitment to personal mastery and on-going development', in particular adding a future perspective by the descriptor, 'Has a commitment to on-going personal and career development' as well as adding 'Has the capacity to deal with change', both important descriptors in managing ongoing change. Kearns has also added one more field, being that of Interpersonal Effectiveness, consisting mainly of descriptors relating to learning from interactional involvement with others. Descriptors mentioned for this field, apart from personal interactional understandings and abilities, also include a more global perspective in the descriptor “Has cultural understanding and can learn in situations involving cultural diversity in Australia and overseas”. Kearns' (1999) adaptation would appear to both revise and attempt to modernise elements of the original characteristics by Candy et al (1994); however, it can be noted that the inclusion of Kearns' descriptors regarding team building serves to adjust the original concept from undergraduate students towards workplace involvement.

Nevertheless, engagement in learning, by utilising strategies that relate to Kearns' (1999) adapted characteristics, can be viewed as part of a powerful process relative to lifelong learning, and emphasises the 'enabling and encouraging' aspects important to stimulating lifelong learning's self-motivating process. Whether in a formal or informal learning environment, self-directed learning utilising prior knowledge and skills is likely to create a positive, rewarding and challenging learning process. Candy et al (1994, p.121) confirm that this can occur within formal settings, suggesting that “...courses that develop incrementally at the same time as they foster independent learning equip students to go on learning throughout life”. The independent informal learning viewed as providing self-

direction in learning would also appear to be an important element in stimulating continuity of learning throughout life. As Foley (1995, p.105) asserts, "If lifelong learning is to occur then there must be an emphasis on learning to learn. It will be up to the learner to learn and not the providers of education and training".

While the descriptors listed give a basis for further understanding of lifelong learners, there are a number of other significant influences on lifelong learning. In adjustment to change, the areas of resilience and transformative learning have received considerable interest in recent years. Recognition has been given to qualities of resilience demonstrated in responding to life changes such as adversity and other life difficulties. Focus on the area termed 'resilience' was originally made in research on protective factors that assist children to overcome environmental and incidental difficulties (Garmezy 1991, Benard 1993, Krovetz 1999, Oddone 2002, Greene and Conrad 2002). Lewis and Harrell (2002, p.279) define resilience as, "...the ability to recover strength, spirits, good humor, and so forth, following misfortune or change".

Resilience is increasingly seen as being instrumental in positive adjustment. Benard (1993, p.44) asserts, "despite overwhelming adversity many children bounce back"; furthermore, Benard profiles resilient children as having "social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future". Personal autonomy is a central notion in resilience (Benard 1993, Henderson and Millstein 1996, Lewis and Harrell in Greene 2002), and is identified by Benard (1991, p.5) as being "...a sense of one's own identity, and an ability to act independently and exert some control over one's environment". The attributes of resilience are thought to be influential in the attainment of competent adulthood by children who have demonstrated resilience (Benard 1993, Krovetz 1999), and may have lifelong influence (Benard 1991, 1993, Krovetz 1999).

In terms of Kearns' (1999) adapted characteristics from Candy et al (1994), resilience demonstrates a commitment to personal mastery and on-going development with, in particular, the developed capacity to deal with change. Furthermore, resilience could be viewed as representing a constituent of a repertoire of skills for learning in various

contexts. Although an emphasis is made on the response to adversity through resilience, the ability to manage change has other influences including societal context and cultural differences (McCubbin et al 1994). Resilience can be viewed in terms of Antonovsky's (1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11) second principal foundation, "the resources necessary to meet the expectable challenges, even the extraordinary challenges, of life in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways".

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1990) is advocated as a further view of learning in response to change. In terms of Mezirow (2000, p.3), "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action". Edwards et al (2002) further describe learning as, "the transformation of understanding, identity and agency".

In the event of a situation that questions a belief, individuals are confronted with a choice of response and consequently the effect and personal change produced. Scott (1998, p.178) suggests, "The assumption is that for transformation to occur, there must be something that unsettles us, shakes us up". Transformation for an individual includes what might be termed as a 'big picture' perspective, where the transformation occurs within a value system structural viewpoint that has wider implications than being solely personal:

The aim of the change is to catalyze a fundamental shift in people's beliefs and values and must include a social vision about the future based on a value system that includes the struggle for freedom, democracy or equity, and authenticity.  
(Scott in Scott et al 1998, p.178)

Reflection is a significant area in transformational learning. Mezirow (2000, pp.23-4) asserts that, "A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight". Mezirow describes our expectations from the views we hold as meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Cranton (1998, p.198) maintains that:

Often our perspectives have gone unquestioned. We do not know where they came from and have never examined their validity. When we are led to question our assumptions, critical reflection, the central process in transformative learning, takes place. We can question the content, the process or the premises of our assumptions.

According to Mezirow (2000), the qualities of “emotional intelligence” (Goleman 1998) are also essential in effectual transformational learning. For transformational learning to occur, Mezirow (2000, p.11) relates that “awareness, empathy, and control” are needed. These social competencies are seen as important in interactive response to others. Furthermore, understanding of oneself and maintaining authenticity in response to others is also promulgated: “Self regulation includes self-control and trustworthiness (maintaining standards of honesty and integrity)” (Mezirow 2000, p.11).

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is concerned with personal changes made as a result of learning. The emphasis in transformational learning can be viewed in relation to Antonovsky’s (1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11), “the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves”. Motivation to learn from change is also emphasised by Mezirow (2000, p.31) when he asserts that, “In fostering transformative learning efforts, what counts is what the individual learner wants to learn”. The pressure on society to create opportunities for involvement by individuals is likely to be necessarily an ongoing focus. Ecclestone (1999, p.345) maintains, “challenges to encroaching authoritarianism and pessimism demand a belief that people can solve problems and define what these are for themselves”.

Mezirow emphasises the importance of taking personal responsibility for learning, and in terms of Kearns (1999) addresses a number of key elements of lifelong learning. One area particularly emphasised is in the area of ‘an inquiring mind and curiosity’, where transformational learning occurs powerfully through ‘reflective habits’ but also through ‘a love of learning and discovery’. In the area of ‘helicopter vision’, the awareness of



interconnectedness is beneficial to transformational learning. In 'interpersonal effectiveness', an involvement and ability to learn with others is pronounced. In 'a commitment to personal mastery and on-going development', the capacity to deal with change is a particularly important element. In 'a repertoire of learning skills' understanding of one's own learning is useful. There are a considerable number of similarities between Kearns' characteristics of lifelong learning and Mezirow's elements of transformational learning.

While the response by individuals to the range of opportunities that they choose to learn from is clearly important, learning from interaction with others is increasingly seen as a central notion in lifelong learning. The joining together of individuals into learning communities is likely to further influence lifelong learning within society (Brown 2000a, Renshaw 2002). According to Kilpatrick, Barrett, and Jones (2003, p.11):

Learning communities are made up of people who share a common purpose. They collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created.

Kearns (1999, p.4) refers to the development of learning communities as being one of the key dimensions of lifelong learning, part of developing a learning society. He suggests a need to "generally foster a learning culture to underpin economic activity and quality of life for all in a learning society". Development of and commitment to individual learning skills are key aspects in choosing to learn. In addition Kilpatrick et al (2003) suggest that in the twenty-first century emphasis will change from the twentieth century concentration on the individual to an increasing emphasis on individuals responding to change as members of learning communities, thereby minimising risks, in what Beck (1992), in acknowledging the changing nature of society, describes as the "risk society". Wenger (1998) discusses the importance of involvement in social learning networks that he refers to as "communities of practice". The emphasis in a community of practice is on the

sharing of attributes such as skills and knowledge. Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000) describe attributes of a community of practice as including shared purpose, learning interactions, linked networks, commitments and shared values.

The notion of increasing social capital through the encouragement of lifelong learning has received attention in recent times (Field 2000). Social capital can be regarded as, “the sum of the social values (norms) networks and trust that facilitate a group’s purposeful action” (Falk in Falk et al 2000, xii). Kilpatrick (2002, p.460) further states that, “Communities that want to enhance their learning through building social capital should work to develop shared language, shared experiences, shared visions, trust, personal development and an identification with the community”. The notion of social capital is an important one, and Kilpatrick (2002, p.460) further relates that, “Social capital can be thought of as the oil that lubricates the process of learning through interaction”. The accomplishment of increased social capital through lifelong learning encompasses a complexity that needs considerable attention through understanding of elements affecting it. As Preston (2003, p.247) comments, “the relationship between learning and social capital is tightly embedded in social structures of class, gender and ethnicity”.

In terms of ageing, considering the comments made earlier regarding the social structure of people of older ages becoming an increasingly powerful social force, the contribution made by people of all ages, including those of older ages, is important in terms of the social capital input that is enabled by their inclusion. Exclusion due to age is not only ageist but also detrimental to social capital outcomes. In a criticism of its role in formal education Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.122) state:

When it comes to learning, our society is still age-graded. Times have changed, the need for lifelong learning and relearning has increased, but our institutions have still not caught up to the new realities. They operate as if life consisted of three compartmentalized periods – education, work, and retirement, in that order.

The encouragement and nurturing of individuals within learning communities, as part of what is increasingly regarded as a learning society, would appear not only to benefit society overall but also to support the ongoing changes necessary to promote improved elements of quality of life through individual lifelong learning. The increasing emphasis on individual responsibility, as discussed earlier, can be assisted by involvement and support from others, with the likelihood of pooled internal resources being beneficial to all individuals in a learning society.

Butler posited the benefits of Australia's development as a learning society (1989), though vocational advantages from the fulfilment of the concept were emphasised. The benefits of lifelong learning to a learning society are similarly further emphasised by the SEETRC (1997, p.1): "...both notions must guide the development of education and training policy in Australia". Policy documents still emphasise lifelong learning more distinctly by the linkage to economic aims; Learning Together (2000, p.7) states that:

It is not surprising that the nations and groups that are giving top priority to lifelong learning are those responding most positively and effectively to the impact of globalisation, new information technologies and major changes in the employment base of economies.

The United Kingdom Dearing Report (1997), while focusing on the importance of lifelong learning, emphasises the citizenship, vocational and economic benefits of the learning society, though the need for personal growth through a process such as learning-to-learn key skills is also prioritised. Field (2000) refers to social and economic developments that are influencing the learning society and raises the question, "Is the learning society amenable to change?" (p.154), commenting on the potential wastage to society on a global level if opportunities in lifelong learning are not realised. However, in order for these opportunities to be realised, Paye (1996) considers that there will be a necessity for "a major change in attitudes towards learning by all members of society".

Fullan (1993, p.136) further emphasises that “The development of a learning society is a societal quest”.

NBEET (1996) acknowledges the dual imperative between firstly, learning for societal economic aims, and secondly, personal learning through economic goals and intrinsically motivated learning. This is a view endorsed by Ralph (2000, p.56), who emphasises that lifelong learning needs to have outcomes relating to “Personal fulfilment... social development... [and] economic prosperity” in order to benefit an evolving learning society. Gorard et al (1999) emphasise the need for informal learning to be acknowledged as a critical part of lifelong learning within the conception of a learning society.

Lifelong learning can be viewed as a contested concept (Merrill 1999, Oliver 1999). Oliver (1999) raises questions on the way lifelong learning is regarded as a universal remedy of beneficial change. He suggests that understanding lifelong learning as a problematical concept enables a more rigorous examination of lifelong learning, and further considers that the balance between government focus and perceived individual benefit needs addressing.

Edwards (1999) claims that the view of lifelong learning as being essential to the achievement of social, and in particular economic, goals is unproven. He contends that, “The new age of lifelong learning therefore seems to be conducive to a type of new age discourse, wherein the harnessing of emotions, attitudes and values displaces the requirement for rigorous argument, evidence and debate” (pp.32-33).

Continuing emphasis on the formal area of lifelong learning is apparent in government and organisational policies and reports, such as the European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996), the United Kingdom’s Dearing Report (1997), and Learning Together (2000). However, Edwards (1997, p.174) advocates that a wider focus is needed in a learning society towards:

...the economic, social and cultural challenges confronting individuals and social formations in the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century... The capacity to meet those challenges requires continuing learning and recurrent opportunities to learn. As with individuals and organizations, the notion of a learning society signifies a reflexivity to processes of change which is characteristic of contemporary times.

Barnett (1998 in Moreland 1999, p.161) suggests that confusion about the concept of lifelong learning relates to conflicting objectives. He suggests that there are "...four versions of the learning society: the economic approach; enhancing quality of life; the democratic approach and the emancipatory approach". For example, the emancipatory approach would include Merrill's (1999) suggestion of a need within a learning society for formal lifelong learning to be utilised to assist inequities within society. She states (1999b, p.11) that, "Lifelong learning is necessary if social cohesion is to be achieved."

Lifelong learning, or lifelong education at least, is therefore viewed as a means of social control to promote the integration of individuals into society. Merrill (1999b) and Duke (2000) emphasise the need for change within formal education structures in Europe to offset perceived societal inequalities. Merrill suggests (1999b, p.26) that, "If higher education in Europe is to play an essential role in the development of a learning society which emphasises equality, social inclusion and community, cultural and structural changes have to occur. Elitism and inequalities have to be challenged." This view is endorsed by Oliver (1999), who emphasises the need for individual choice of lifelong learning rather than general acceptance of governmental and policy claims, and criticises "the lack of precision which sometimes accompanies the concept" (p.7).

Merrill (1999a) suggests that for many women, formal learning through universities has empowered them in their lives. Nevertheless, she further suggests that governmental support and changes in social structural issues are also necessary to assist equality: "Empowerment, however, must embody a redistribution of power within society to emancipate those who previously lacked power" (p.207).

Aspin and Chapman (2000) suggest that lifelong learning will continue to be important in the twenty-first century through the focus of policy makers. However, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis of governments is often an economic one and can preclude the wider range of personal meanings that occur through lifelong learning. Brown (2000a, p.7) states, “The policy challenge, both here and overseas, is how to integrate the three overlapping sites of lifelong learning – learning in and for the workplace; learning in and through formal and informal education and training; and community-based learning”. This involves a wider perspective than the limitation of the need for accreditation required by the United Kingdom government in response to lifelong learning (Moreland 1999).

The complexities arising from longevity are raising many social issues as the future profile of society evolves. As Maddox (1991, p.10) queries, “Can contemporary aging societies reach consensus about the future of aging they wish to construct?” All members of the learning society will be engaging in ongoing learning of some kind from birth through all years, to death. This conception of learning is in contrast to the stage-related manner portrayed by the Australian Association of Adult and Community Education (1995), which describes lifelong learning in socio-cultural tiers based broadly on a wide range of transitions. It is noted that despite claiming to subscribe to a non-age structural approach, the Association still utilises the term ‘third age’. This term has come to be related to persons of higher chronological age.

As both learning and ageing are lifelong enterprises, a learning society will need to review its conceptions of age, resisting and avoiding negative societal age-related restrictions, and encouraging self-directed lifelong learners as part of an integrated society. Negative stereotypical attitudes to age linked to cultural perceptions of ageing clearly have restrictive implications for lifelong learning, in effect limiting involvement in learning throughout life. Attitudes to age, consequentially, can be influential on lifelong learning.

### 2.12 Attitude to age

Earlier discussion emphasised the increase in individual responsibility for social wellbeing and the role of autonomy in lifelong learning. The influence of individuals on their own ageing process is often overlooked and underestimated. Minkler (1996, p.481) suggests empowerment as the basis for “newer, culturally relevant ways of thinking about ageing in multicultural societies”. For individuals, the choice of a view of their own ageing could be influential in responding to personal changes. Conflict between self-perceptions of age identification and fulfilment of age role expectations in society is an increasing concern, as the way older people regard themselves has altered by virtue of changing social circumstances (Swindell 1999). While changes in the viewing of age have continued to occur, adaptations to the changes are not always made. Limiting beliefs, based on chronological age, can also lead to restrictions on the way our lives are conducted. As Neugarten and Neugarten (1986, p.40) assert, “Some people live in new ways, but continue to think in old ways”.

Attitude towards age and ageing may affect behavioural influences on longevity leading to different ways of thinking. This is a factor in the way we physically age, and towards an achieved desire of living longer (Keeton 1992). Perls and Silver (1999), from a study of centenarians, suggest a key attribute in living longer is in having an attitude towards age where age is not regarded as a limitation. Moreover, in commenting on the desire to live, Friedan (1993) refers to the increased likelihood of men dying within two years of their wife’s death – while pointing out that the reverse was not the case.

In regard to health, there is evidence of increasing choice of beneficial health habits (Rowe and Kahn 1998, Nuland 1999, Perls and Silver 1999). The viewing of health in terms of wellness rather than illness is an example of a conceptual switch in thinking (The White House Conference on Ageing 1996b), and is reflected in the growing recognition of the importance of attitude as related to self-efficacy in terms of improvements to health (Rodin and Langer 1977, Rodin 1986, Seligman 1990,

Rawkowski and Hickey 1992). Olshansky et al (1998, p.52) further argue that, “...the expression of senescence is inherently modifiable; increasing longevity without sacrificing health or adversely influencing the delicate social fabric of life will be an important and difficult challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. Recognition of the individual choice inherent in improving lifestyle habits is made by Olshansky et al (1998) as being the individual part of increasing longevity in terms of the ‘manufactured time’ commented upon earlier.

Developments in areas regarded as positive ageing are based on a choice of response to how life is lived, as discussed earlier. Weekes and James (1998) suggest that the ‘superyoung’, people who “act, think, and feel years, sometimes decades younger than the age on their driver’s licences”, emphasise the importance of a positive attitude to the way life is lived. Neugarten and Neugarten (1987, p.31) discuss the changing behaviours of younger adults, such as displays of “childlike behaviour” in terms of expressing spontaneity, and self-interested behaviour. Langer (1991, p.121), in a study invoking elderly subjects to access a state of mind of their experience twenty years earlier, concluded that:

The regular and “irreversible” cycles of ageing that we witness in the later stages of human life may be a *product* of certain assumptions about how one is supposed to grow old. If we didn’t feel compelled to carry out these limiting mindsets, we might have a greater chance of replacing years of decline with years of growth and purpose.

In terms of learning, both resilience and transformational learning rely heavily on personal intentions. Seligman (1990, p.291) further maintains that there is a personal choice in how response to life circumstances is made, and that our attitude is within our control. He discusses the benefits of choosing to think in an optimistic manner as including improved health, achievement of personal goals and a sense of fun and enjoyment, but cautions:



Optimism is just a useful adjunct to wisdom. By itself it cannot provide meaning. Optimism is a tool to help the individual achieve the goals he has set for himself. It is in the choice of the goals themselves that meaning – or emptiness – resides.

Self-efficacy in our self-belief in choosing goals about a particular sphere of influence could affect our attitude (Bandura 1994). Consequently, self-efficacy could influence personal fulfilment of chosen beliefs toward elements of ageing. Accordingly, a positive outlook toward ageing is suggested as beneficial to quality of life (Langer 1991, Kerschner and Pegues 1998). Hurd (1999, p.436) refers to two ways that individuals regard their own chronological age, by the spoken repertoire enacted and by presentation of a positive self-image. In her research, some subjects attempted to resist a categorisation as 'old'. She relates that this group, the 'not old', also "suggest that these are the best times of their lives and promote positive, youthful, active, and upbeat self-images". From both the viewing of life in an overwhelmingly positive manner and the resistance to age-categorisation, empowerment through active choices of life involvements would seem to be occurring.

Two different ways of viewing age further indicate that empowerment can occur through attitudinal change. Jolanki, Jylha and Hervonen (2000), as a result of interviews with people over ninety years of age, suggest that the way that age is talked about is by two different repertoires, a choice repertoire and a necessity repertoire. In the necessity repertoire a perception of age is viewed as deterioration, while in the choice repertoire, "Talk about old age as a choice is used to undermine the necessity repertoire and to argue for various and more positive definitions of old age among which one can make a choice" (p.359).

Other ways of viewing increasing chronological age include the concepts of feeling resignation or rage. One possibility, for an individual, is to be resigned to a perception of what increasing age will bring with it. Kirkwood (1999, p.15) discusses a fatalistic view: "ageing must happen because it is part of the natural order of things to wear out".

Consequently, this view could relate to perceived decreasing mental and physical faculties, to feeling an increased sense of powerlessness and perhaps even worthlessness regarding a role in society, and in essence being resigned to living life in accord with many negative stereotypical ageist influences. Another view might be to feel anger, and to rage inwardly and perhaps outwardly, against a sense of injustice at increasing age. Within this view might appear characteristics such as resentment against the body, and fearfulness of disease, the concept of dying, and perceptions of inevitable financial instability. Denial of ageing might be encompassed within this view, and involves inherent self-deception and inherent inauthenticity. Birren (1999, p.468) stresses the prevalence of denial: "There is little doubt that ageing invokes strong actions of denial". However, whether all people ageing are in some state of denial would be arguable.

An expectation of how to behave and regard opportunities for living might follow societal expectations. An illustration could be of behaving as a 'free spirit' at a younger age, perhaps up to twenty, and gradually at age thirty or forty, 'settling down' and not demonstrating potentially conflicting attributes such as spontaneousness or playfulness; or by following expectations of body shape, flexibility and strength related to stereotypical concepts of age. At an older age, this might also include a resistance to adoption of new technologies or other 'new' things or behaviours. However, despite societal patterns of conformity, changes are occurring that emphasise autonomy and increased personal choice. Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) confirm a fading of the differentiations between generational ages. As Bytheway (2000, p.785) suggests, "Joe Bloggs, 53, is free to conform to the image of a 33-year-old, and we are free to think he looks 73. It is in this complex patterning of body and image that gerontological research should flourish".

Young (in Dean 1992, p.1403) suggests that the use of chronological age can add to social difficulties and suggests recognition of age being private knowledge and not for public use. Similarly, Neugarten (1974, p.330) refers to an "age-irrelevant society" as "one in which arbitrary constraints based on chronological age are removed, a society in

which every individual has opportunities consonant with his needs, desires, and abilities, whether he is young or old”, creating the basis of a society without age restrictions.

In this thesis, I argue that despite powerful historical and current cultural perceptions relating to age, including implicit and explicit societal messages, some people, of any chronological age, display characteristics that are not congruent with age-related expectations. As stated earlier, for the purpose of the current investigation a present definition of agelessness is: people who conduct their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in. This may include exhibiting behaviours, and holding attitudes and values that do not follow cultural perceptions pertaining to age. Despite the effect of cultural influences on perceptions of ageing, some individuals would appear to resist being culture-bound.

### **2.13 Agelessness considered**

Agelessness is one term, being derived from age, and further to ageless, that is sometimes used to refer to possessing qualities that seem less constrained by age-related restrictions. In recent years, the use of this term has increased in the academic literature (Kaufman 1986, Cetron and Davies 1998, Andrews 1999 and 2000, and Bytheway 2000) and in popular literature (Deller 1991, Dyer 2002, Samuelson 2003). On the World Wide Web, a recent search using the term ‘agelessness’ produced 3970 hits (Google 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2004, from the World Wide Web), while at the time of commencement of this study, in 1999, a similar search yielded 23 results.

Moreover, the term is used in different ways, from “never waxing old” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989, p.247) to Cetron and Davies’ (1998) use of agelessness as the extension of life spans from improvement in medical technology. Deller (1991) uses the term in relation only to older people for the purposes of survival and fulfilment, and sees the goals of agelessness as looking after our health in the present, “to feel and look and act and be as young as we want to be”, asserting that “we must take steps to slow down the aging process itself”. He regards agelessness as the seeking of the faculties and physical

appearance of a younger time, to be sought at an older age, while Fossel (1997) views being ageless as genetic manipulations to extend life.

In the popular literature agelessness is also used in different ways, relating to concepts of body, mind and soul. Samuelson (2003) refers to the old wanting to be younger and the young older. He further states that, “we have progressively demolished the life cycle’s traditional stages”. Kramer discusses her concept of developing personal agelessness, “to explore and expand in awareness to our soul’s agelessness” (Kramer 2004). Chopra (1993) suggests that by changing our perception we can better access the body’s inner intelligence, in effect to restyle the way we age by influencing our non-physical aspect dimensions.

While it is noted that the focus of this study is on the term agelessness due to the attention it has received, consideration of the concept in the sense defined here has not been widely made, and some confusion of meaning may be apparent. Agelessness has been chosen as a representative and understandable term for the concept outlined in the definition. In particular, perceptions of agelessness could be very useful in assisting our understanding of processes related to age. The differences in already perceived meanings of agelessness, as discussed, are not necessarily seen as a restrictive limitation of the study, as ambiguity may be viewed as a natural and acceptable part of the way we live our lives, but agelessness has been chosen as a term to enable the underlying concept to be discussed. However, it is therefore important in focusing upon agelessness that the term be explored in depth, so that a deeper understanding of the descriptive characteristics of the underlying concepts concerned may be gained.

This dissertation endeavours to clarify understanding of agelessness, as this term can be regarded as an emerging dimension related to age. In particular, agelessness’ relationship to key areas of lifetime experience of importance to ageing, lifelong learning and social wellbeing are addressed within this study. A key part of this study will investigate the characteristics of agelessness. In addition, this dissertation takes the position that classifying an area of higher chronological age, by implication signifies ageist

categorisation, as earlier discussed. Consequently, the study follows Bytheway's (1995, and 2000) asserted viewpoint that old age should not exist as a category.

In terms of the definition of agelessness used for this study, there are several distinctive areas that are unlikely to be encompassed within the concept. These areas – such as gerophobia, being fear of age and old people, and ageist stereotypes – while related to concepts of age and ageing, are in seeming contradiction to the concepts inherent in the definition stated.

Recent debates have occurred regarding agelessness. The term agelessness itself has been criticised as being a form of ageism (Andrews 1999). Andrews (1999) considers the concept of agelessness, in her terms, as being ageist by denying people the right to the age they have earned by length of living. She regards agelessness as being limited to older people, and restrictive therefore in its acceptance of the years of living and experiences of a lifetime. Andrews (1999, p.312) asserts, "The reconstruction of old age as a time of agelessness is the epitome of... denial". This view would seemingly regard agelessness as being an attempt to identify with a younger, more youthful age with consequent negation of the older age period, and in effect, of the years of experience up to that point. She further declares:

Researchers of ageing must learn to resist the temptation of agelessness.  
Ironically, this denial of difference, the erasure of the years lived, further  
entrenches the barrier between us and them, as it strips the old of their history,  
and leaves them with nothing to offer but the mimicry of their youth.

Katz (2001, p.27) critically suggests that the "anti-aging culture is effectively reinventing notions of maturity, aging, and elderhood with ideals of timeless living and growing older unburdened by the signs of aging".

However, the term agelessness as defined in this study is not anti-ageing but more aligned to Bytheway's (2000, p.788) view that a key area of research is on "how we make

sense of our experience of ageing". Agelessness is re-defined in this study as being unrestricted by chronological age, and accepting of the incorporated continuity of life experiences. The extended definition used in this thesis to the concept discussed by Andrews explores a wider and deeper meaning. Gibson (2000, p.779), in assenting to Andrews' views on the need to resist agelessness, comments that "the chief justification of this rejection... [is] we continue to change as we age. We do not remain the same". However, the limitations of being ascribed to a particular age category, in addition to cultural age influences, are likely to increase resistance to change. Bytheway (2000, p.783) states, "I refute that old age exists as a stage in life". Agelessness, in the meaning used here, encompasses ranges of people of any age and is not a categorisation given to people of any particular age stratum, as is suggested by Andrews.

Furthermore, agelessness in this study is the term given to a non-bounded area related to age, without visible or invisible demarcation points. In particular, agelessness is not to be seen as a denial of experience or years in the ageing process, but as a perspective that can benefit the experience of ageing. Although Andrews (1999) argues against agelessness in the terms inferred by her, she does suggest the need for a study of identity related to ageing based on the effects of experience and change.

The concept of agelessness is also not to be viewed as a lack of respect for people of higher chronological age. While respect based on age may be regarded differently in some cultures, for example, the "symbolic honor" given to older people in Taiwan (Harrell 1981), deference to and equality for personhood is promoted within this study.

People displaying characteristics of agelessness may have a modelling effect on others. Minichiello et al (2000, p.276) posit that the effect of enacted individual modelling by some older people is an influential active negotiation for changing perceptions of ageing:

They enact a 'new image of ageing people', challenge stereotypical notions of older people and educate others about positive images of ageing. They chip away at societal images of old people, which seem to others to be an insurmountable

obstacle. By focusing on the struggle over ageism in their own lives, these older people are making a contribution to the transformation of older people's images, and to the creation of a climate in which ageism can be named and critically analysed in order to deconstruct it, identify its sources and causes, and determine ways it can be changed.

Conversely, a modelling effect can occur from the following of stereotypical behaviour. Estes (1979, p.13) suggests that "Stereotypes of old persons as senile and sexless may *teach* older persons that they are becoming senile and sexless so that they act the part, irrespective of their competence and sexual potency". How people of any age are viewed could model demonstrated features, and affect people of similar ages or of other ages by their representation.

Youth participants of the White House Conference on Aging (1996b) emphasised the potential benefits to younger people of modelling by people of older ages, in areas such as wisdom. Similarly, Bandura (1994) asserts that modelling assists in teaching strategies to respond to life events. In effect, by the display of authenticity and genuineness in lived behaviour, older people displaying these characteristics become a further element of a growing social force for change.

#### **2.14 Issues of identity**

Identity is a salient issue within this study. As discussed within theories of ageing earlier in this chapter, researchers such as Erikson (1965) suggest that there are developmental changes throughout life that can clearly affect identity. Identity is discussed in more depth within the Chapter Three section on an interpretive biographical approach, being regarded as a more suitable placement due to the focus on meaningful life experiences related to identity detailed within that section.

### 2.15 Summary

This chapter has shown how recent increases in longevity are likely to have significant societal and individual impact. The increased attention being given to ageing, and in particular to higher chronological ageing, is indicative of the proportional shift towards higher ages being experienced in Australia and throughout the world. As this chapter indicates, the additional average years of life likely to be experienced from improved longevity increasingly raises questions relating to existing concepts of ageing. It enhances the need for an understanding of issues related to age, in particular regarding the way that the average additional years are to be lived.

Issues of ageing, for an individual, cannot be avoided. As Olshansky et al (1998, p.52) comment, "...almost everyone either experiences or is a witness to senescence, the variety of physiological changes that accompany the passage of time" Attention to societal and individual concerns and effects on all ages is clearly needed, as it is evident that extensions of longevity are likely to have an increasingly important relation to perceptions of ageing.

A shift in the way age and ageing are viewed has occurred over time. In particular, a view of ageing that often emphasised negativity and decline has been replaced with increased understanding and sometimes rejection of stereotypical views of physiological changes, and focus upon exemplars of positive and successful ageing.

Furthermore, changes within society are likely to occur as a response to increases in longevity. As Dychtwald (1999, p.85) states, "Old simply isn't what it used to be". Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.194) foresee "a future in which there is a substantial increase in lifelong education, a comparable increase in leisure time during the years of employment and child-rearing, and a reduction in the years of complete retirement".

This chapter argues that interactions without age as a limiting criterion would be beneficial to society and to individuals. People of all ages might be more ideally served



by communication of aspects of mutual concern, such as by increased empathetic understanding and acceptance of others (Dychtwald 1999), rather than facets of potential social dysfunction. These include actions and beliefs accentuating inter-generational conflict and age stratification that can create misunderstandings leading to increases in antagonism and perhaps eventually outright conflict.

The experience of living is the experience of ageing. Different ways of thinking about ageing that involve empowerment of individuals in their own ageing process are needed to assist in breaking down ageist stereotypical barriers, and in considering the role of learning and adjustment to change from experiences. Lifelong learning is regarded as critical in responding to change, and is an important constituent of the creation of a learning society. Furthermore, an awareness of social wellbeing issues is necessary in assisting individuals to be empowered in response to ageing.

Some individuals are choosing to not follow cultural stereotypes of age. It is posited that there is a growing social force of people of all ages who are acting as catalysts in changing perceptions of age. By their operation of individual triggers to changes in their own life course, they are examples of the society's life course age-norm transitions.

As discussed by Butler (2000b), the area of ageing known as old age is being redefined. Focus upon influences affecting age would be beneficial as a basis for understanding changing perceptions of ageing and the aged. Recognition of the importance of attitude to age, and an understanding of the concept of agelessness and its relationship to lifelong learning, and to social wellbeing, may assist development of ideas and concepts related to ageing.

There is little doubt of the importance of lifelong learning to individual development. Aspin and Chapman (2000, p.17) refer to "...personal development and fulfilment" as being a central notion of lifelong education. Thurow (1996, p.317) sees lifelong learners as, "the real heroes of the future... who have the ability to dream, the will to conquer, the joy of creating, and the psychic drive to build an economic kingdom". Walters and

Watters (2001, p.477), in a similar vein, describe lifelong learning as, “a project of the imagination... The concept is visionary”. Lifelong learning in its many forms, based on the multitude of experiences of life, has a potential to enrich and transform life. Chapman and Aspin (1997, p.27) referred to personal, economic and social perspectives as “the ‘triadic’ nature of lifelong learning”, while Candy (2000, p.33) encompasses these concepts in summarising, “...lifelong learning is vital to Australia’s international competitiveness, to our quality of life including our social inclusiveness, and to the employability and satisfaction of individuals”.

Kearns’ (1999) adaptation of Candy et al’s (1994) lifelong learning characteristics have been selected as the basis for comparison with those emerging in regard to agelessness in this study, being notable in terms of the range and distinctiveness of the characteristics given.

The following chapter describes and discusses the methodology design, data gathering processes, and the basis for analysis of the data. Methodology developed and used is by mixed methods to further understand agelessness, lifelong learning and social wellbeing, and to better understand the key variables in terms of lives lived.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the methodology utilised to achieve the purposes of the study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of agelessness, its relationship to lifelong learning, and to social wellbeing. The study aimed to also ascertain contributing influences to agelessness, as well as situated contexts relevant to the concept of agelessness. It was felt that the concept of agelessness, while being unclear in the literature, could be understood better through the vibrant reality of subjects' perceptions, and through an examination of lived lives of people identified as demonstrating agelessness characteristics as identified in the early phases of the study. In consequence, an emphasis for this study is placed on subjects' opinions of key study variables, related to the way that lives are situated and lived.

After commenting upon the approach used, an introduction for each phase will be followed by a description of the method and data collection techniques chosen, as well as a discussion of the interactive role of the interviewer. Procedures utilised including sample selection and basis for the data collection process follow. Data analysis considerations include the basis for how the data was analysed as well as the data analysis process. Trustworthiness of the data and limitations of the overall design are then addressed.

### **3.2 Qualitative methodology**

Qualitative methodology was chosen to achieve the purposes of this study. Qualitative research is particularly suited to looking at issues from the participants' viewpoint (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Silverman 2000, Hatch 2002). As Hatch (2002, p.7) explains, "Qualitative studies try to capture the perspectives that actors use as a basis for their actions in specific social settings". Qualitative methodology provides the opportunity to

collect data of distinctive value, responding to the understanding that can be derived from a uniqueness of individual cases including experiences and contexts (Stake 1995).

The valuing of uniqueness reflects the importance placed on an individual's opinions, thoughts and emotions, and how these impact on life experiences. In effect, this study conceptually examines what is meaningful from the experiences of individuals. Hatch (2002, p.9) stresses, "Qualitative research is as interested in inner states as outer expressions of human activity". The methodology chosen allows the study participants to present their response to what is asked of them, consequently emphasising the necessity in qualitative research to listen to what has been presented. Krueger (1998b, p.3) relates that, "...we are open to different ways of seeing the world... We strive to be open to the reality of others. We seek to tell someone else's story".

As well as choosing qualitative research for its strong emphasis on participant perspectives, it was also chosen for the possible range of techniques. In particular, there was a wide range of suitable qualitative techniques available for evolving stages of the study. In this study the qualitative data collected from each phase was utilised to assist in development of the following phase. As Silverman (2000, p.63) confirms:

The beauty of qualitative research is that its rich data can offer the opportunity to change focus as the ongoing analysis suggests. However, such changes of direction... do not come out of the blue but reflect the subtle interplay between theory, concepts and data.

Qualitative methodology was also chosen to retain consistency through the mixed methods used in different parts of the study. Mixed methods were utilised in the different phases of the study to refine and develop emergent themes from a preceding phase, with a choice of a suitable technique to accomplish the aims of the next phase. Morgan (1993), Burns (2000), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), and Silverman (2000) suggest that a combination of qualitative methods can be desirable.

### 3.3 Overview of the three phases of the study

To achieve the aims of the study three research phases were constructed:

- Phase One

Phase One incorporated two steps. Firstly, a literature review concentrated on theory building from identified literature in the areas of age and agelessness, lifelong learning, social wellbeing and in the development of an appropriate theoretical framework for the study. During this time working definitions of key terms, and careful analysis of indicators of key study variables, were derived from the literature. Secondly, an exploratory study to determine perceived characteristics of agelessness was undertaken, with subjects presently involved in, and committed to learning. University students participating in formal education courses, with a broad range of post compulsory education ages (eighteen years and above), were asked to assist in developing understanding of descriptors for the concept of agelessness.

- Phase Two

In Phase Two, focus group discussion was related to concepts and descriptive characteristics of agelessness, and to aspects of lifelong learning and social wellbeing. Linkage in question formulation was also made to key underpinning thematic areas enunciated from obtained Phase One descriptors. Groups reflected, probed and discussed concepts based on some prioritised descriptors, related them to socio-culturally situated practice, extended, refined or endorsed them, and otherwise assisted with emergent and changing themes and processes.

Two focus groups of people who were participating in formal education courses were coordinated. The choice of subjects was purposive (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Patton 2002), of post-compulsory education ages. Views from a wide range of chronological ages were elicited from each group: from post-compulsory pre-twenties, twenties,

thirties, forties and so on. At the higher end of the chronological age range, subjects in their eighties and nineties attended.

- Phase Three

Three situated biographical case studies were conducted of a subject's reported life's long learning. The case studies consisted of biographical in-depth interviews with people selected, by a purposive sampling process, on the basis of being perceived to display agelessness characteristics. These characteristics were developed through Phases One and Two. Areas discussed related to research questions, the evolved descriptors and emergent themes that had been established in Phases One and Two, as well as possible constraints provided by situational contexts, such as business, home or community. The importance of nonnormative events as part of individual stories of ageing was commented upon earlier (Tennant and Pogson 1995, Kenyon and Randall 1999, Randall and Kenyon 2001). Consequently, the question of whether adaptation and the ability to adapt through learning were enhanced by epiphanies or turning points (Denzin 2001) was addressed, as were responses to critical changes in surrounding support systems that call for adaptation and new learning leading to personal agelessness concept development.

Table One summarises the methods used in this research from the three phases of data collection and analysis.

**Table One: Methods**

PHASE	Methodological approach	Number of subjects	Techniques	Analytic techniques	Instrument
ONE	Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, Strauss and Corbin)	88	Descriptive survey	Survey analysis (Burns)	Survey
TWO	Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, Strauss and Corbin);	2 groups x 9	Focus groups	Grounded theory (consistent with Strauss and	Focus group discussion

	Focus groups (Morgan, Krueger)			Corbin); Focus group analysis (consistent with Krueger)	guidelines
THREE	Narrative (Barone, Polkinghorne); Life history (Tierney); Case study (Stake); Biography; Interpretive interactionism (Denzin); Existential ethnography (Denzin); Interviews (Holstein and Gubrium, Seidman)	3	3 In-depth interviews x 1 to 1½ hours for each subject	Narrative analysis (consistent with Polkinghorne, Seidman, Barone, Munro); Interpretive interactionist; Existential ethnography (Denzin); Life history (Tierney)	Established Interview proformas

### 3.4 Ethical considerations.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee. Ethical considerations are important considering the extent of the involvement requested of subjects. As Hatch (2002, pp.65-66) contends:

We ask a lot when we ask individuals to participate in our qualitative studies. We usually ask for a considerable amount of time, but more important, we ask participants to reveal what goes on behind the scenes in their everyday lives. We ask them to trust us to the point that they are comfortable sharing the intimate details of their lifeworlds. We make some sort of record of these, then we leave. We ask a lot, take a lot, and if we are not careful give very little.

Consideration was given to provision of procedures likely to be respectful to the subjects involved in the study. The purpose of the study and the involvement required was discussed with the subjects as a group in Phase One and with each subject individually in Phases Two and Three. A statement of informed consent was obtained from each subject of Phases Two and Three (see Appendices D and K). Participation was entirely voluntary, and subjects were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. In view of what they gave to the study it was rewarding to receive

comments from many members – at all stages of the study – that the study focus had catalysed them to reflect beneficially on personal meanings.

Every effort was made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Transcriptions did not contain any identifying information (names or gender), tapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet in a secure room and all data in Phase Two was collapsed into themes rather than considered as individual contributions. In Phase Three, pseudonyms were given for each subject and for their location, both in the transcriptions and the narrative analysis presentation. Every precaution was taken to guard against the responses being identifiable.

### **3.5 Phase One: Exploratory study**

#### **Introduction**

For the purpose of this investigation, the characteristics of agelessness, as perceived by participants, were sought. An exploratory study was conducted in order to assist in formulation of descriptive characteristics and resultant thematic groupings (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998) connected to the concept of agelessness. An initial study can be valuable to obtain further depth in understanding a range of issues, in particular by focusing on areas of uncertainty (Denzin and Lincoln 1998); in this study, on the characteristics of agelessness.

#### **Method**

To determine perceived characteristics of agelessness, it was decided to proceed with a descriptive survey (Burns 2000). Characteristics of agelessness were sought from a question related to a posed situation (see Appendix A). A descriptive survey is an appropriate technique because it enables the establishment of the views of a chosen population on a topic. It is particularly suitable in obtaining the views of a large number of people on a chosen topic and by enabling responses in a short period of time (Burns 2000). A limitation of this process is that questions are structured, as the numbers of



participants are so large, and consequently flexibility in design and in relation to participant response is lessened.

### **Sample selection**

The subjects for the exploratory study were chosen purposively (Creswell 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Patton 2002), related to determined demographic criteria. Patton (2002, p.230) relates that this sampling process "...focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study". It was decided to choose subjects who had displayed an interest in learning and were from a wide range of ages, and were accessible to the researcher.

The subjects invited to be involved in the exploratory study were those enrolling as University of Tasmania Unistart Preparation participants in 2001. The Unistart program is designed to assist new students to the university in acculturation and learning skills development. My request to access the students was relayed to them by the coordinator of the programme; students were asked to volunteer to assist in developing understanding of the concept of agelessness. The final sample comprised 88 participants, with no student on the programme refusing to assist. The age range, was between 18 and 74, with 31 males and 57 females. The group of participants chosen were people who had enrolled in formal education and it could be presumed were interested in learning. There was a wide range of university faculty areas represented by the respondents. The sample matched several demographic criteria including being from a broad range of post compulsory education chronological ages, with home locations in different areas of Tasmania. Also, this group was chosen for ease of access. These participants were accessed, as a group, for a one hour session. Subjects were expected to show differing views as they came from a variety of backgrounds.

## Procedure

The survey was pre-tested (Burns 2000) with six different university students, with similar characteristics to the sample group, so that clarity of communicative purpose would result in the looked-for data. No alteration to the survey was felt to be needed as a result of the pre-test.

In a lecture theatre setting, the subjects were informed of the background and justification for the study together with the study's working definition of agelessness. The concept of agelessness was introduced by stating the working definition of agelessness for this study, and by an outline of features clearly not likely to be associated with agelessness, in terms of the working definition given. These were the concepts of ageism such as age-stereotypical behaviour and gerophobia, being a fear of old age and old people. After this agelessness concept introduction, students were asked:

Think of someone you know – of any age – who seems to you to be an agelessness person. What key words would describe the characteristics they have, that have led you to think that?

Students were observed to be silent and thoughtful, and recorded their responses without interaction, taking approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete what was asked of them. Survey collection was made by someone not involved in the study assuring anonymity and confidentiality by sealing the information obtained in an envelope prior to analysis.

## Data analysis

### *The basis for the data analysis*

For the richness and depth of meanings and understandings of the data to be revealed, it was essential that analysis be made in a way in which assumptions and presumptions were not reflected. In Phase One, analysis was made using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998) to assist in underpinning the research process, enabling deeper content analysis to occur by allowing theory to develop from the data.

In developing grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) aimed for a contrast with the common practice of initial theory influencing the analysis of the data. The grounded theory approach maintains that the reality of what was analysed was contextual to what is occurring in practice. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.12) grounded theory is "...theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process". They discuss further that the researcher does not anticipate results by perceiving initial theory constructs, allowing the theory to emerge from the data.

Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.169) confirm that grounded theory is intended "...to guide researchers in producing theory which is 'conceptually dense' that is, with many conceptual relationships". They discuss further the need for the theory to interactively arise from the data being analysed, as well as keeping connection between process and those providing the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) relate that theories, being developed in an ever-changing world, are always subject to ongoing rethinking and revision through describing, conceptual ordering and theorising; all being processes incorporated within this approach. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.170) state, "grounded theories are not just another set of phrases; rather, they are systematic statements of plausible relationships".

Grounded theory procedures are used in this study for the benefit of depth of analysis of the data. Grounded theory provides analytic processes by which data can be looked at in detail, theoretically grouped and synthesised. Parts of the process may not always be systematic (Strauss and Corbin 1998), with an emphasis sometimes made on the need for imagination in analysis to "enhance the creativity that is innate" (p.14). Flexibility is maintained by using the strategies of this process in a comprehensive and interactive

manner, looking for both literal and inferred connections. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.21) relate that this occurs by “not only conceiving or intuiting ideas (concepts) but also formulating them into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme”.

Grounded theory utilises analytic techniques that can assist in the development of concepts by incorporating systematic procedures. Silverman (2000, p.144) discusses the generation of categories leading to “general analytic frameworks”. Coding is a major strategy of the approach and is a key part of the analytic process, leading to “conceptual density... richness of concept development and relationships which rest on great familiarity with associated data and are checked out systematically with these data” (Strauss and Corbin in Denzin and Lincoln 1998, p.161). By coding it is meant “The analytic processes through which data are fractured, conceptualised, and integrated to form theory” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p.3).

Following procedures related to questioning and constant comparisons assists in developing theory, and is salient to a grounded theory approach. To analyse the data in a comprehensive manner, important coding procedures used were “...of making comparisons, asking questions and sampling based on evolving theoretical concepts” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p.46). Making comparisons is important in grounded theory. Constant comparisons are made by the scrutiny of similarities and differences leading to a categorisation of similar aspects (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Silverman, 2000), and can assist objectivity, lessening possible researcher bias. Questioning establishes focus in the seeking of an understanding of data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) discuss the importance and types of questions that promote investigative complexities within the data, thereby facilitating theoretical comparisons.

Silverman (2000) refers to criticism of the grounded theory approach, in particular about a perceived lack of clarity in testing the theories arising from the data. In this study the use of other qualitative techniques in later phases incorporates and extends the findings of the Phase One analysis. This also adds to and consequently provides transparency in the analysis process.

Grounded theory was particularly appropriate for this study as it was intended, as in relation to the developing understandings of the key concept of agelessness it was essential to allow the descriptors and any related contextual information to become known from the data collected. For this to occur without undue researcher influence, it was necessary that theoretical expectations from the data were not pre-empted, thus creating limiting assumptions of agelessness constructs. Furthermore, understandings in considerable depth also enable more intricate connections to be made.

### *The data analysis process*

Thematic analysis followed from initial constant revisiting of the data and by not immediately categorising. First, the responses were read through carefully several times to gain an impression of the scope of replies. After familiarity was established, potential general thematic areas were noted by a highlighted colour coding. For example, different colours were used for noting a range of attitudes such as risk-taking or displaying curiosity. Following this the parts still white (untouched) were looked at carefully. The question was then posed as to why they didn't fit in anywhere within the groupings established initially. If no ready answer was ascertained then they were left on one side for the present, and at a later stage re-regarded.

In the process described, a constant comparison and questioning process was followed to discern likely connections between responses of characteristics. Any coloured responses were now removed and re-categorised, and the sub-grouping category tentatively named. Next an attempt to collapse all the items into the sub-grouping and to find a word or words that embraced all the ideas in the sub-grouping was made. This process was carefully continued until it included the noted phrases. Not all responses clearly fell into the emerging sub-grouping categories, and those not ascertained as related to categories were put to one side for later intercession.

At this point the carefully arranged data were left for several days. On each of those days a viewing of the non-highlighted parts was made to try to ascertain any significance or linkage for the replies not yet grouped. On re-application to the analysis, sub-grouping categories were compared and incorporated into others, linking the smallest number of responses obtained for further development into parts of a coherent whole. Eventually Thematic Area Groupings (TAGs) were formulated which encapsulated the sub-groupings of the characteristics given by the participants.

### **3.6 Phase Two: Focus groups**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of Phase Two was to assist further understanding of the research variables. In this phase, emphasis was placed on in-depth consideration of emergent themes from Phase One, as well as on extending understanding of key study variables related to socio-culturally situated practice. For this purpose Phase Two utilised focus groups as a means of obtaining data.

#### **Method**

Focus groups are not a new method. The first focus groups were developed as collective experiences known as the focused interview by Merton and Kendall (1947), and evolved eventually through “amiable congruence” (Merton 1987, p.556) into the present concept of focus groups. This development over a period of time has resulted in a research method useful for some important purposes. Focus groups enable an individual’s views to be presented in a discursive context. As Hatch (2002, p.132) states, “Focus group interviews rely on the interactions that take place among participants in the group to generate data”. Individuals who have potentially diverse characteristics are brought together for interaction and discussion on considered topics (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994, Kitzinger 1995, Knodel 1995), or as Greenbaum (2000, p.3) maintains, “to delve

into attitudes and feelings". Through the group setting of focus groups, interactive responses may be developed further.

Focus groups were chosen for this study for several reasons. They empower subjects to have their views represented on a variety of issues (Morgan 1993, Krueger 1998b), through both a collective voice and by individual perception (Morgan 1993). Hatch (2002, p.132) refers to focus groups as having "the capacity to capture the dynamics of group interaction", while Morgan (1988) discusses the value of gaining insights from focus groups' interactions from group participation that might be less available from individual responses. Furthermore, focus groups were chosen for the perceived depth of response possible from a range of participants, such as from the utilisation of probe questions as a basis for following up issues of interest. This offers advantages over approaches with more fixed responses such as questionnaires, while not requiring the extended time that would be needed for the added depth of one to one interviews with a similar number of subjects.

The purpose of this phase of the study was for the focus groups to discuss issues based on research questions from the study relating to concepts and descriptive characteristics of agelessness, with additional consideration given to lifelong learning and social wellbeing. The focus group discussion guidelines (Appendix E) were developed, providing linkage in question formulation to the TAGS obtained from Phase One, as well as relating characteristics from the Phase One sub-groupings of the TAGs to socio-culturally situated practice.

Research questions and elements arising from the literature review were also considered and embodied within the guidelines. Questions sought the views of the respondents on issues such as the keys to healthy ageing, and on intergenerational communication, with assistance from questions originally formulated for the White House Conference on Aging (1996a). Further aspects were added to more fully encompass areas of age transcendence, such as perceptions of approach and attitude, age-irrelevance (Neugarten 1972), and regarding characteristics of lifelong learning (Candy et al 1994). Also,

questions were included pertaining to the three areas encompassed within a quality of productive life (The White House Conference on Aging 1996a), community, economic security and social wellbeing.

The listed guidelines' questions provided consistency of content between different focus groups (Krueger 1998b), but the order was not followed strictly within the discussions themselves, being flexibly adapted to the actual discussions of the groups. This variation is noted as important to capture rich data (Morgan 1988, Krueger 1998a), for example, allowing probing questions to be discussed on areas where an enthusiastic response has been made, consequently adding contextual linkages. Nevertheless, the structural aspects of the guidelines did ensure research aims were fully addressed through coverage of the questions with each group.

A limitation of focus groups, according to Hatch (2002) is in the dominance of a moderator both within the discussion and in limiting scope of question topics. In this study, awareness of those factors resulted in a range of considerations including an emphasis on assisting participants to feel comfortable when speaking within the group setting, and strategies to avoid participants being unduly influenced by the moderator and by peer pressure in the group, including allowing, and at times encouraging, the flow of discussion by changing the questioning order, as mentioned, or by allowing the discussion to develop, so that in effect the interviews had a semi-structural process.

### **Sample selection**

Purposive sampling was used as the basis of selection for the chosen sample (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Silverman 2000, Patton 2002). Purposive sampling was used in Phase Two to obtain a sample of subjects who displayed criteria appropriate to the aims of the phase. As a consequence the sample selected for each group consisted of people of a range of ages from eighteen years of age to, in one group, a subject in her nineties, while in the other group a similar structure occurred with the eldest member being in her eighties. Although age group banding of ten year periods was utilised, the grouping of ten years



was not significant in itself, and the rationale was related to the choice of a wide variety of ages (Settersten and Mayer 1997). Furthermore, the participants were enrolled in formal education courses, making it likely that they were interested in learning. As with the exploratory study the sample was expected to show a variety of views as participants were from a variety of backgrounds and a wide range of chronological ages. The Phase Two subjects were different from Phase One subjects. The participants were chosen to achieve an approximately equal gender split, allowing the views of both genders to be expressed. The focus groups consisted of 7 males and 9 females.

Contact was made with potential participants by means of a telephone call or by personal contact. After agreeing to be a part of the study, each subject was telephoned and sent the following:

A personal letter inviting them to participate (Appendix B);  
an enclosed information sheet relating to the study (Appendix C);  
and a statement of informed consent (Appendix D).

Consideration of the number of the groups, and the size of the groups was focused upon so that analysis could be implemented in sufficient depth for the aims of the study. Two focus groups were chosen, as it was felt that having two groups constructing data that would be analysed in depth was advantageous, in comparison to numerical extension of groups with the potential of less intensity of analysis, due to restrictions in researcher time. A particular asset of the groups in this study related to the potential information-richness of participants from a wide range of ages being involved. As Patton (1990, p.185) maintains:

The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size.

The size of the groups was considered carefully. Krueger (1998b, p.17) discusses the improved benefit of input and ideas that flow from having smaller groups than “the traditional recommendation that focus groups be composed of ten to twelve participants”. The groups in this study were both of eight participants, enabling potential enhancement of the average amount of discussion time available to each. Having two groups of similar key demographics related to age groupings and commonality in involvement in formal study also assisted in some aspects of comparative analysis.

### **Procedure**

A systematic operation of some parts of the focus group interviews was used. This included a methodical manner for the presentation of the introduction to the questions, and in the techniques used to collect data. Consequently, this methodical approach assisted in providing linkage and consistency to the process of the interviews and in so doing benefited some coding of the data analysed, and the way that information given was verified. While this structural basis was followed to obtain greater consistency between the two groups in the general subjects discussed by each, there was flexibility demonstrated within the interviews in following the flow of responses of the participants, as earlier mentioned. This included the follow-up to enthusiastic answers, or in probes to some areas to provide greater depth and clarity of response.

The procedure for data collection followed in the focus group interview sessions commenced with a moderator (this researcher) introduction. The introduction made by the moderator was in accordance with the procedure utilised in the exploratory study. This informed the group of the background and justification for the study, and related the working definition of the study for agelessness, so that there would be consistency of understanding of the terminology used by subjects between Phase One and Phase Two. The interview then proceeded in accordance with the focus group discussion guidelines.

The subjects were asked for a written response (as noted in Appendix E) as a means of individual focus on the subject area concepts. The written question was presented as the

preliminary basis for the focus group discussions for two reasons. Firstly, it ensured that all participants would have a ready-written response. This was likely to give them confidence to enable them to respond verbally to tape recorded discussion. Secondly, the sentence stub question (where only the first few words are written) was chosen as it would appear to concisely provide the basis for discussion on inter-generational views, an important age-related area. It mirrored ones instigated at the White House Conference on Aging 1995, though there are no results available of their analysis. Albrecht, Johnson and Walther (in Morgan 1993) note, "group idea-generation process benefits when it begins as a parallel, individual process". Written responses before follow up discussion encourages a uniqueness of response (Albrecht, Johnson and Walther 1993, Greenbaum 1998).

Tape recording was chosen as providing the basis for the requisite depth of analysis sought. Full transcripts from tape recordings of the sessions were made, and according to Krueger (1998b, p.45), this process is more "time-intensive [and] more rigorous" than other methods of recording. In considering the need for detailed and scrupulous interpretation of data to ensure that the views of participants were construed with sufficient attention, this method was deemed appropriate.

Apart from interview transcripts, an important additional means of providing further information is by direct observation within the operation of the groups. Moreover, two other techniques related to focus group method, memory and note-based recording (Morgan 1998, Krueger and Casey 2000), were also utilised related to issues arising. Notes on these observations were made by the moderator both during and directly after the interviews. Moderator observations are beneficial in conjunction with the direct nature of the moderator-participant questioning process. An emphasis on ensuring effective listening skills for the moderator assisted flexibility of questioning to occur in the interviews, such as changing the question sequencing "on the fly" (Krueger 1998a, p.25), when necessary. The need to demonstrate awareness and focus on group input could limit the extent of moderator written observations and notes made; nevertheless, these outline notes provided valuable elements for later reflection.

An assistant moderator was also used in the focus groups (Morgan 1998). The duties of the assistant moderator included making reflections on the group interactions, and in debriefings with the moderator, providing additional trustworthiness in data interpretation.

The assistant moderator was provided with a sheet of 'Assistant moderator responsibilities' (see Appendix F) to assist comprehensiveness, discernment and assimilation of potentially important information. Furthermore, focused debriefing between the moderator and assistant moderator also aided this process (See Appendix G Assistant moderator debriefing sheet). The assistant moderator considerably supported the process by making field notes (see Appendix F number seven) that included, "...key points in the discussion, notable quotes, and important observations – silent agreement, mutually understood body language, indications of group mood, ironic or contradictory statements".

## **Data analysis**

### ***The basis for the data analysis***

The focus groups' analysis was guided by the research aims related to key elements of the research questions. Morgan (1998, p.89) refers to the analytic process from focus group data as "qualitative content analysis". The analysis had as its undertaking the intention to "...depict reality as understood and experienced by others" (Krueger 1998b, p.22); consequently, it was essential that a process of analysis was followed that comprehensively interpreted the literal and inferred layers of the data. Krueger (1998b) refers to the complexity of analysis, and in particular the different levels of analysis of what was said. These include literal comparisons, contextual understandings, and emotional commitment to what was said, as well as consistency issues of internal participant comment. He emphasises that "...the interpretive process aims at providing understanding" (1998b, p.28).

The analytic process followed was generally systematic and incorporated use of grounded theory, particularly in relation to concept development (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998) and the approach to coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), so that consistency was maintained between the analyses of the two groups.

Flexibility in seeking to interpret the data presented was also provided for. While the discussion guideline questions presented to the focus groups were in a set order, as mentioned earlier some flexibility of sequence occurred. However, the set order in the guidelines did not pre-empt the interpretation of the data into formulaic sections but, importantly, provided direction related to key objectives of the study.

Group interactions related to the questions posed can also lead to topics emerging other than those signalled within the discussion guidelines. This occurred within the groups and was a notable benefit in exploring and interpreting the scope of topics related to the key research areas. However, topics can be raised which are not necessarily of importance to the study and can appear to be 'soap box' topics of an individual participant. In this study, this occurred in Focus Group One, but was taken into account in the analysis.

Situating what arises from interviews is critical (Denzin 2001). In this study, situated contexts, such as temporal, emplacement of boundaries, and perceived perspective of the participant, are viewed as potentially significant in giving a fuller understanding of experiences. As a result, cognisance of the importance of situating subjects' experiences (Mischler 1986, Erben 1998) was observed in question formulation and in contextual prompts, assisting understanding of situated contexts of subjects' experiences.

The personality characteristics of an individual are displayed within social contexts (Lave and Wenger 1991). A wide range of inter-relationships may therefore be necessary to assist our understanding; for example, for the purposes of this study, in understanding whether the demonstration of descriptors of agelessness is more related to a style of living than to what might be regarded as a personality template. Within the interviews,

“situated selves” (Barone 2001, p.161) are developed through interviewer selections of procedure and focus, leading to the arrangement of social interactions between the subject and the interviewer. While Mischler (1986, p.34) emphasises the need for “...contextually grounded” interactions in interviews, this depth of interactions is not easily discernible in the focus groups. Erben (1998, p.6) identifies contextual factors in biographical research in terms of stages.

**Table Two: Contexts for Specific Events (Based on Erben 1998)**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Components</b>
<b>Local Context for Specific Events:</b>	Personal interactive context: family – other significant persons  Learning/education context: formal learning – informal learning  Socio-cultural context: friendship – childhood – marriage – retirement  Social wellbeing: health – economic circumstances – emotional states e.g. happiness/ sorrow/ anxiety/ contentment. Also: surprise/ achievement/ disruption/ hopes/ recollections and nostalgia  General everyday lifestyle: not specific to one context – across the contexts encountered in everyday life
<b>Societal Context for Specific Events</b>	Social/geographical/political/economical characteristics of the wider society: - social stratification - political system - economic system - circumstance e.g. war or famine
<b>Location</b>	-home – work/occupation – community -town/city – country – local neighbourhood

In this study, it is helpful to discuss the use of characteristics of agelessness within different contexts, and for this the term 'situated-style' (Barone 2001) will be used. For an individual, this might be choosing to use characteristics within a particular context, such as within family situations, but perhaps not always in work-based ones. Social institutions are strong agents in their expectations related to age, and an understanding of different settings and any possible restrictions includes situationally-bound actions. For example, situationally-bound actions could include having lesser expectations of a person in the workplace in the years prior to retirement age, or limitations brought about in the compulsory school system by the specific age and grade linkages for students.

While a key beneficial component of focus groups is the interaction between participants, there are parts of this interaction which, in analysis, need careful attention. It was important, for example, to be cognisant of any occurrences of peer pressure. Focus groups are, according to Morgan (1995), influenced by group dynamic elements and one concern is that in groups some members will influence others (Krause et al 2000, Krueger 1998b), thereby giving undue influence to responses. However, peer pressure is more likely to be influential when some enumeration of responses is made in analysis. Morgan (1995, p.522) strongly contends that, "simpleminded counting... will produce simpleminded results. Instead you must pay careful attention to the amount of consensus and interest that topics generate". In the results section relating to the two focus groups, the influence of others is commented upon, with change of opinions on the basis of discussion by a vociferous member of the group given less credence than a change due to stated reflection on the topic.

The interest generated in the topics raised for discussion in the focus groups is another notable element demonstrated within the dynamics of the group (Krueger 1998b). Possible indications included non-verbal communication, such as changed face and body posture or voice tone, and emphasis changes that could be related to a display of feelings (Krueger 1998b). These factors were noted and incorporated in the analysis of this study.

Level of consensus was important in analysing strength of opinion within the focus groups, and a positive attribute in establishing responses from the group to key topic areas. However, Albrecht et al (1993) suggest caution in group interactions that seek agreement, as 'groupthink' may affect what has been said through participants seeking cohesion. Overall, in the focus groups, evidence of consensus was apparent for some questions, but differences of opinion occurred and were transacted in a constructive and accepting manner by other group members, as noted in the analysis.

Internal consistency is a salient factor in interpretation of focus group responses. Adequate internal consistency was assisted by awareness of peer pressure, as discussed above, and by participants providing examples and elaborating when asked probe questions. "Vague or cryptic comments" or inconsistent comments (Krueger 1998b, p.47) were viewed as further components demonstrating markers of internal consistency, and in these groups comments were probed further by the moderator and on some occasions developed more substantially by the groups. The specificity of responses and whether the comment made was experiential, and readily attributed to the speaker – for example, by answering in first person – assisted in authenticating the views given and was a further internal consistency element demonstrated (Krueger 1998b).

Trustworthiness of the data was assisted in several ways. As well as having a systematic operation of focus group interviews (Krueger 1998b), having the same moderator and assistant moderator in each group added to consistency of focus group operation, as did having focus group guidelines as a basis for the interviews. Furthermore, trustworthiness was aided by utilising the assistant moderator in an inclusive role, to provide assistance within the focus group interviews and evaluative feed back after each interview.

To further ensure trustworthiness of data, at the end of each interview participants were asked a final or summary question (Krueger and Casey 2000), with the main points noted by the moderator and assistant moderator outlined, providing the opportunity for group members to reflect on the main points raised and to add anything missed.



*The data analysis process*

Prior to analysing the replayed and fully transcribed focus group conversations, the tapes of the sessions were further replayed to ascertain any characteristics not initially observable from the literal transcriptions. This included making sure comments were attributed to the correct speaker, and that elements of the conversational environment could be incorporated within the analysis. These elements included conversational pauses, the degree of emphasis and tone, and the responses given by participants to particular people, for example, the need for variation in tone and response of group members to the hearing impairment of the 94 year old lady in one group.

Group dynamics are unique to any group by virtue of the interactions within each group; nevertheless, comparisons between the groups are an essential part of the analysis. Knodel, Sittitrai and Brown (1990) discuss in detail the break and control characteristics of different groups with the resulting possibilities of comparisons. The groups in this study consisted of people of a similar range of age differential groupings, and these break characteristics (Knodel in Morgan 1993) enabled contrasts reflective of age differences between answers of the groups to be of considerable value in providing alternative responses to the interview discussion questions.

Overall, the interest and passionate expression of responses within the groups relating to particular issues, from several or more members, was regarded with significance. Krueger (1998, pp.35-6) refers to elements such as, "Frequency – how often was it said?; Extensiveness – how many people said it?; Intensity – how strong was the opinion or point of view". What is not said can also be notable, for example, lack of emphasis on comments relating to agelessness and on physical characteristics was noted in both groups (Krueger 1998). On later reflection these omissions were regarded as significant, and assisted in data analysis.

Observation of the context of the comments is essential in locating what has been spoken. The nuances of the words spoken, such as tone, emphasis, and other aspects of non-

verbal communication provide additional cues to understanding of meaning, as against the words in literal transcription. However, Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.106) also emphasise "...that the conceptual name or label should be suggested by the context in which an event is located. By context we mean the conditional background or situation in which the event is embedded". This naming of concepts was associated contextually in this study, with actions or described behaviours linked to the time of life in which they occurred, or to the placement within a particular environment such as family background.

While analysing data, in accord with elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998), many code notes were initially inscribed on the transcripts. These were developed further as 'memos' (Strauss and Corbin 1998), in this study being notes reflecting thoughts and ideas of the moderator based on the transcript group interactions. These memos provided further insight into comments made in the sessions; in particular, they were of some assistance in developing the concepts into report categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), assisted analysis by property categorising, and relating varieties of interactions further developed depth of category understanding. Subsequently, sub-categorisation of key elements of the analysis was related to the research questions. The purpose of axial coding, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.127), is to "...look for answers to questions such as how come, where, when, how, and with what results, and in so doing uncover relationships within categories". In this study the range of probe questions asked and the link to situational contexts assisted this level of development.

### **3.7 Phase Three: Situated biographical case studies**

#### **Introduction**

In Phases One and Two the focus was on theory building in terms of characteristics of agelessness, and on understanding of lifelong learning characteristics, with consideration

given to linkage with social wellbeing. The characteristics being generated in Phase One were related to Phase Two, which in turn described and situated characteristics of agelessness, including perceived linkages within social contexts, as well as building further understandings of lifelong learning and social wellbeing.

The purpose of Phase Three was to gain understanding of the life's long learning of people identified as demonstrating agelessness characteristics. Having developed some understandings of characteristics related to the key study variables, it was intended that further understanding of theory's possible emergence during a life's long learning would be beneficial to achievement of the research aims.

After analysis of the results from earlier phases of the study, further perceptions from people regarded as displaying agelessness characteristics was sought. The subjects, through a series of biographical in-depth interviews, described and reflected on the stories of their lives, through a selection of past experiences, deemed by the subjects to have been influential in their lives.

Furthermore, the subjects' present experiences were discussed through ongoing reflection, as were perceptions of their futures. Questioning included linkage to evolved descriptors and emergent themes obtained earlier in the study from the exploratory study descriptive survey and the analysis of focus group interviews. Main areas of focus included development of the concept and understanding of agelessness, as well as adaptation to learning, and perceived linkages to lifelong learning and social wellbeing. Other aspects included possible constraints provided by situational contexts, in relation to surrounding support systems, and the role of epiphanies and turning points (Denzin 2001).

## **Methods**

The methods developed, drawn from qualitative methodology, involved existential ethnographies through life history narrative biographical case studies, utilising an

interpretive interactional approach. The methods chosen for this phase established coherent links between the procedure utilised for data collection, the data analysis process, and the written report.

### **Case study**

In previous phases of the study, characteristics of agelessness and understandings of lifelong learning and social wellbeing were generated. In this phase the applicability of those characteristics to lives lived was considered. Methods were developed to ascertain participants' perceptions of their life experiences within social contexts. The perceptions became a basis for understanding of concepts related to key research questions.

Instrumental case study (Stake 1995) was chosen as a method for Phase Three of this study, being an appropriate way of obtaining rich data from investigating depth of response within the lives of individuals (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Burns 2000, Patton 2002). Stake (1995, p.64) refers to a principal use of case study being "...to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others".

The distinctiveness of the data was achieved through a narrative reasoning process that was specific to the case in question (Polkinghorne 1995). The social worlds in which the experiences are situated or located (Lave and Wenger 1991, Denzin 2001) are an integral part of the uniqueness that biographical incidents display (Stake 1995). Further in-depth, 'unique' understanding of the theory constructed in a life's long learning was sought. According to Stake (1995), the intrinsic value of the case, within what he terms its "bounded system", is by its nature non-generalisable. He asserts (1995, p.8) that:

The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is understanding the case itself.

While generalisability by relationship and inference to other populations was often sought in earlier times (Silverman 2000), generalisability was not the focus of what the chosen method revealed about the lives of the subjects relative to the research questions of this study. Instrumental case study was chosen to provide a rich and resonant understanding of the life of an individual so that key themes of the study could be better understood. As part of this process, purposive sampling was used in this study for choice of subjects, not to demonstrate generalisability but rather to highlight the uniqueness of each individual case (Stake 1995). As Stake (1995, p.4) further reflects, a "...good instrumental case study does not depend on being able to defend the typicality of [the case]".

### **Sample selection**

This phase of the study involves understanding of the lives of people who were perceived to demonstrate agelessness characteristics. For that purpose, three instrumental case studies (Stake 1995, Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Patton 2002) were chosen by a purposive sampling snowball or chain sampling approach. The existential ethnographic interpretive approach utilised gave prominence to significant moments in a life. Life history methodology was utilised toward meaningful understandings of the case study lives lived.

Further to the aims of this phase earlier discussed, three participants were chosen by a purposive sampling process (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Silverman 2000, Patton 2002). So that the subjects selected were able to provide information to considerably benefit the study aims, it was necessary to choose people who might be viewed as demonstrating key notions of the study in regard to emerging agelessness characteristics from Phases One and Two.

Selection of participants was undertaken utilising a snowball or chain sampling approach (Stake 1995, Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Patton 2002). This method was appropriate as it was felt that the people assisting in choosing subjects were the best available in regard to understanding the focus of this study. In following the process, a number of people were

contacted who might be regarded as having experience, expertise and knowledge in aspects related to ageing and lifelong learning. Initially, those chosen were university academic staff involved in areas of lifelong learning and the study of human development. A professor and a senior lecturer were chosen, both with specific expertise over a considerable period of time in the fields of lifelong learning and adult learning across a wide range of ages.

These authorities then referred other people in the general community and at university specialising in areas related to key study terms. These included lecturers in the study of learning development, a former academic dean and ex-minister of religion who has focused on lifelong human development, and a member of the sociology department. For accessibility, the authorities chosen were ones living in Tasmania.

After discussing with the abovementioned authorities the basis of the study, and emerging characteristics related to agelessness developed from Phases One and Two of the study, the authorities were asked to nominate people who, in their opinion, demonstrated a number of these characteristics. In discussion with the authorities the following points were made:

- Here are some descriptors of agelessness, in terms of what has arisen in Phases One and Two of the study.
- Here are some descriptors of what agelessness is not, e.g. ageism and gerophobia.
- Do you know someone who would seem to you to demonstrate many of the characteristics of agelessness?
- Also choose someone, of any age, who is likely to have extensive life experiences, and be accessible to a number of interviews, therefore, likely to be living in this state.

Others at university consulted about nomination of participants included two doctorate students with current studies in the areas of age and learning. Within the general community, people having experience, expertise and knowledge in areas related to ageing

were contacted. These included Adult Education coordinators, and a coordinator of Third Age programmes. In addition, several participants of Third Age programmes were contacted.

From the nominations made by the authorities, an initial list was made of possible subjects. As Patton (2002, p.237) suggests:

By asking a number of people who else to talk to the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases... The chain of recommended informants would typically diverge initially as many possible sources are recommended, then converge as a few key names get mentioned over and over.

The authorities who had nominated the most likely participants were further consulted to confirm that those participants conformed to the demonstrated selection criteria. Consequently, participants were chosen who were mentioned more than once and who, in the opinion of those consulted, demonstrated many of the characteristics required. Case typology and noted demographic features were taken into account prior to definitive choice of participants.

At an early stage of the study, as it was intended to interpret a life's long learning, it was planned to choose one subject who would have extensive life experiences. This was thought to be probably, though not necessarily, a person of a higher chronological age, perhaps being over sixty to seventy years of age. However, agelessness concepts do not limit experience by chronological age and in keeping with evolving perspectives of this study, what was eventually deemed more critical for this stage was the need for a case to be information rich and authentic (Stake 1995).

The choice of only one participant was felt to be too limiting in gaining some understanding of the multiple perspectives emerging from the study, and it was decided that three subjects would provide a more comprehensive understanding. The number of

participants chosen related to the stated purpose for the phase, as well as limitations in time together with the considerable depth of analysis for each of the case studies in Phase Three. While an increase in the number of case studies is always likely to be useful, within the scope of the present study three case studies was considered as being sufficient for the purpose of this phase of the study, taking into account the relationship of the aims of this phase to Phases One and Two of the study. As Stake (1995, p.7), in emphasising the importance of the particularised quality of the study, argues, "Case study seems a poor basis for generalization. Only a single case or just a few cases will be studied, but these will be studied at length."

Furthermore, as the original concept of choosing a person of higher chronological age was contrary to the posited agelessness concept of the study, age was not therefore regarded as a determining characteristic for subject choice. Primacy of choice from the specialists led to the eventual subjects chosen being of ages seventy seven, fifty two and thirty seven. It was felt that a gender split would assist in raising awareness of possible gender predispositions in the data, and accordingly the choice of two males and one female (or vice-versa), was required and obtained, thereby providing an optimum gender balance for the study. A willingness to participate and to be available for the study, together with convenience for participant and researcher, were other factors. In addition, age perceptions are often influenced by culture (Tennant and Pogson 1995). Tierney (2000, p.540) believes that a life history "...can assist to gain a greater understanding of cultural notions". The participants were chosen from differing background cultures, though in only one of the participants was there a cultural upbringing from outside Australia, and for that person the last thirty years had been lived in this country.

The procedures of this phase of the study included a process of identifying the field from Phases One and Two. For example, the focus groups in Phase Two discussed lifelong learners as being people who learn from what happens in life in different settings, and not exclusively related to formal education. As the exploratory study and focus group subjects were involved in formal education, it was thought preferable not to limit



selection of people in this phase to people who were presently working within the area of education and training.

The particular people that were contacted arose from more than one source, and fulfilled selected demographic and other criteria, as discussed. Three suitable subjects agreed to participate in the study.

Initial contact was made to the subjects by a telephone call (See Appendix H). In the interviews the subjects were invited to give an account of their lives. On obtaining the subjects' approval of participation and making an appointment for the first interview, a package was sent by post. This included: a letter (Appendix I), the information sheet (Appendix J), the statement of informed consent (Appendix K), a life timeline (Appendix L), and four turning point moment sheets (Appendix M). The approach developed enabled the subjects' prior focus on pivotal moments of their lives that might arise in the discussion. 'Turning point moments' (Appendix M) was provided with an objective of assisting discussion of epiphanies or turning points in the subjects' lives (Denzin 2001). The subjects were asked to identify these often critical life events related to local contexts of situated events chosen from Erben (1998, p.7). These appendices were provided to assist the subjects' thoughts with a skeletal focus, and addressed and spotlighted the association of situated contexts with events, ahead of the interviews. They were not collected as data.

### **Age and biography**

Biography, being "...an account of a life" (Denzin 1989), has particular importance in respect to ageing. Biographical research is a flexible qualitative technique enabling appropriate choice of methodology to achieve research aims (Erben 1998). As Ruth and Kenyon (1996, p.2) affirm, "Biographical approaches, such as narratives... provide an excellent medium for investigating both the ideographic and shared aspects of human aging over the life span."

Biographical techniques enable participants to communicate the meanings from the changes they perceive in their lives. As Ruth and Kenyon (1996, p.2) relate, "The transitions we undergo as we age, how we develop throughout the life span, and how individuals experience and value their own lives can effectively be explored by analyzing a person's own inner images".

Kaufman (1986, p.6) comments that old people "...do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather, they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age". In effect, according to Kaufman (1986) the meaning does not come from the age but from the ageless self. As Dominice (2000) states, "In educational biographies, age is often mentioned even if it does not do anything". Consequently, this biographical study emphasises individual meanings of ageing not related to specific age.

In the past, ageing has been habitually portrayed as being stage related. The life cycle was seen as stages to move through (Rousseau 1762/1974, Erikson 1965).

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961, Estes 1979, Maddox 1991) and gerotranscendence (Tornstam 1999) further emphasised life stage and life cycle theories of ageing, reinforcing perceptions of age developments being uniform for all (as discussed in depth in Chapter Two). These lifespan or life development theories can be held to reinforce ageist viewpoints through categorisation of expectations for particular age periods.

In recent times theories that regard ageing as stage related have been questioned. Neugarten and Neugarten (1987 in Neugarten and Neugarten 1996) proposed that there was increasing fluidity between stages, while Wilson (2001) observed that it was increasingly difficult to state the points, or ages, of entry to each stage.

Changes in perceptions of age and ageing allied to changes in society, such as suggested by Beck (1992) as the risk society, and to increased longevity have ensured that approaches to ageing have been re-considered (Tennant and Pogson 1995, Kenyon and Randall 1999, Randall and Kenyon 2001). In recent times Continuity Theory (Atchely

1989) and active ageing have influenced perceptions of the ageing process (Minichiello et al 2000), while Baltes and Baltes (1993) refer to a multicriteria approach for successful ageing. The view of age as being non-stage related has coincided with post-modern views regarding the re-creating of identity (Barone 2001, Tierney 2000), as discussed in the Interpretive biographical approach section following.

Postmodernity has led to more fragmented lives and multiple identities, with people experiencing non-linear life trajectories (B. Merrill, personal communication, November 2004). According to Alheit (1995, p.57), “Contemporary life courses seem to have become more difficult: the phases of life one normally anticipates – traditional life plans – have lost the clear contours they may have had, and may even have ceased to exist”. In the risk society (Beck 1992), uncertainties have led to individuals negotiating their lives in ways that they may not have imagined. As Usher (1999) suggests, long established structural frames of reference are no longer applicable. Life is made problematic (Alheit 1992, 1995) by “erosion of the normal life course pattern” (Alheit 1994, p.viii).

Individual choice of the life lived has become, by necessity, more self-directed. Alheit (1995, p.59) affirms, “Biographies are becoming more complicated, more individual, less ‘normal’, but at the same time more colourful, autonomous and self-willed”. Holstein and Gubrium (2000, p.171) propose that life experiences, being biographical particulars, assist in self-construction, allowing individuals to “construct present selves out of what they choose to notice from their immediate and distant pasts”. However, according to Usher (1999, p.69), planning our own life courses has become complex. He suggests that our identities are re-shaped through a self-reflexive process of “reflexive biographies”, confirming Mezirow’s (2000) advocacy of reflection as a key area in transformational learning.

Individual choice of an uncertain life course can, in effect, involve our devising different meandering paths to travel upon. Alheit (1995, p.65) suggests that, “biographicity means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as

‘shapeable’ and designable”. Furthermore, he suggests that within biographicity is always the potential of our unlived lives, and as a consequence our lives can be viewed as “existences in transition” (Alheit 1995, p.68). Therefore, there is considerable scope for learning from life experiences in the changing world of today.

### **Interpretive biographical approach**

An interpretive research approach was chosen as being consistent with the aims of this phase of the study. Denzin (2001, p.34) notes that, “...the focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences”. Adversity, being “very difficult or hard circumstances” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989, p.10) is an example of significant life experiences. From the data collected telling the stories of the participants’ lives, analysis occurred in terms of the effects of emerging epiphanies (Denzin 2001).

Interpretive interactionism was chosen as the biographical method for Phase Three of the study. Significant moments in a life can have a considerable influence on how that life is subsequently lived. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.209) refer to these as “...stories of lived experience”. The interpretive biographical approach of this investigation seeks to emphasise, as Creswell (1998) affirms, life experiences situated within historic individual contexts, as well as acknowledging the location of the researcher’s own beliefs as an integral part of the approach. The involvement of the researcher in the process is discussed in more depth later.

Denzin (1989) discusses this approach, a contrast with ‘objective’ approaches such as the Chicago school or objective hermeneutics, as a more suitable method of viewing a life from a subject’s standpoint. Denzin’s development of this method is based upon the work of a range of critical interpretive researchers, foremost of these being Wright-Mills’ (1963 in Denzin 2001) understanding of complex interactions which impact on our existence, such as symbolic representations and values, and the existential questioning of

Sartre (1943/1956 in Denzin 2001). These approaches to biography can be reflectively summarised:

The central assumption of the biographical method, that a life can be captured and represented in a text, is now open to question. A life is a social text, a fictional narrative production. The method of its production is primal. It is what is produced about it. Form is content. (Denzin 1989, p.9)

Derrida (1972) perceived of a “ metaphysics of presence which asserts that real, concrete subjects live lives with meaning and these meanings have a concrete presence in the lives of these people” (in Denzin 1989, pp.13-14). However, the clarity of obtaining and understanding this meaning is problematic, whether from a variety of factors influencing a participant, or from researcher influence. Aspects such as language utilisation, interviewee memory recollection, and researcher interpretation may affect the shape of the emerging narrative.

Identity and its relationship to understood meaning and memory were important aspects examined as a basis for, and prior to, considering the transcript content of the interviews. In this study, identity is viewed as being constantly re-created by memories and experiences and the meaning taken from those experiences. What a meaning is perceived to be within one's life is dependent on the process of memory. On the important matter of subject recollections, Barone (2001) discusses memories and the modernist views of an inert unchanging self, and a post-modernist concept that could be viewed as negating the concept of selfhood. While accepting the arguments against the notion of a rigid identity, Barone suggests that post-modern regard for a non-integrated self is a possible overreaction, maintaining (2001, p.165) that, “The organism strives for coherence, integrating into a historical unity the experiences in which the interactions occur”. Tierney (2000) purports that the interactive nature of the communicative process enables memory of disparate events to be constructed by the participants. He contends that, “Ideology and social and cultural frames help define how we see the past and construct its stories. Identity is not something fixed and predetermined; rather, it is constantly re-

created (p.545)". Holstein and Gubrium (2000 p.95) affirm this view in referring to interpretive practice as "...self construction in the context of going concerns".

In this constant seeking for congruity of identity the importance of memory is paramount. As Ricouer (1981 in Barone 2001, p.165) advocates:

Memory is the glue that holds meaning together, that allows for a life story to be fashioned and related. Without it there would be only discontinuities, only multiple versions of a self, no plot to transform an otherwise unrelated series of events into a life.

It can be contended that the accuracy of the memory is unimportant. The effect of the perceived memory could be argued to be more influential than what actually occurred, if in contrast to the memory. One type of memory is the so-called flash-bulb memory regarded by Brown and Kulik (1977, p.5) as memories related to events of "emotional arousal". Memories such as this are often held to be true but their verification may be contentious. Freeman, Romney and Freeman (1987) maintain, according to Cortazzi (1993, p.82), that, "...tellers believe their accounts to be true, yet know that they cannot be accurate. What is recalled is typical, whether it happened or not".

The important consideration is that the subjects self-construct a meaning based on their interpretation of experiences of the past through their present knowledge. As Richardson (1997, p.108) states, "Through concrete, self-reflexive analyses of specific projects we might come to recognize our own and others' social positionings as both constructed and constructing of knowledge".

The conflict of this interplay between the inner and outer perceptions of the individual is referred to by Denzin as the "...phenomenological stream of consciousness and the interactional stream of experience" (1984, p.66 in Denzin 1989, p.28). Furthermore, this inner conflict could be viewed as the:

...notion of multiple voices: the self then, the self now recalling **then**, the self now interpreting the self then from the present self's perspective, the **self** now thinking of possible future selves, a possible future self looking back to **now** to the present self seeing it as if in the past... (Cortazzi 1993, p.13)

### Existential ethnography

The importance of problematic situations is a critical part of the **existential** ethnographic interpretive approach and the development of identity. Epiphanies, according to Denzin (2001), are an inherent part of biographical method, and therefore **essential** in attempting to understand a life's coherence. Denzin (2001) discusses epiphanies as **arising** within crisis experiences. Denzin (2001, p.32) stresses deeper level situations to **be**, "Interactional sequences that give primary meaning to subjects' lives. **Such** experiences alter how individuals define themselves and their relations with **others**. **In** these moments individuals reveal personal character".

The interpretive interactionist approach mooted is both **emic** and **ideographic**. Denzin (2001, p.40) relates that this approach "seek[s] to study experience from **within** through the use of thick description, narratives and accounts that attempt to **capture** the meanings and experiences of interacting individuals in problematic situations". **Four** forms of epiphanies are asserted by Denzin (2001, p.37) to be:

In the major epiphany, an experience shatters a person's **life**, **making** it never the same again... the cumulative epiphany occurs as the **result** of a **series** of events that have built up in the person's life... In the minor or **illuminative** epiphany, underlying tensions and problems in a situation or **relationship** are **revealed**... [and] In the **relived** epiphany, the individual **relives**, or goes **through** again, major turning-point moments in his or her life.

It is posited here that concepts of agelessness and the individual's **relationship** to lifelong learning could be influenced by what Denzin (2001, p.37) refers to as "**existential** crises

and turning-point encounters”. These crucial experiences are an important part of the multitude of life experiences that have influence on our lives in varying degrees. Barone (2001, p.166) advocates these choices as “life assertions... actions that draw upon accumulated memories of prior activities for their meaning and in turn contribute to the meaning against which future actions will be regarded”. Epiphanies, by having the ability to change a life, could be viewed as momentous for influencing an individual’s future actions.

Within the existential ethnographic process it was important to identify turning points/epiphanies that arose in the interviews. To achieve this objective, participants were encouraged to identify turning points and important events of their lives, before – to assist interview focus – and during the interviews, as a response to interviewer questioning.

Turning points/epiphanies were identified according to the four forms of epiphany described by Denzin (2001). These four forms can be regarded as criteria for the identification of turning points/epiphanies. On the occasions when the participant did not identify an event that according to Denzin’s criteria could be regarded as a turning point/epiphany, then the researcher identified the turning point/epiphany according to the criteria. As Denzin (2001, p.39) states, “Interpretive researchers collect and analyze existentially experienced, interactional texts. This is called doing an existential ethnography”. The researcher’s role within the interpretive interactive approach utilising existential ethnography is, according to Denzin (2001), to have an understanding of epiphanies/turning points and to be able to identify them.

### **Life history**

A study of lives can take many forms dependent upon the perspectives and purposes of the study. Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.186) refer to “...portrayals, portraits, profiles, memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies, journals, diaries, and on and on...” The life history method was chosen as being most appropriate to this study as



it is close to the existential ethnography basis of the phase, consisting, as Tierney (2000) discusses, of both “portal” for entering the world of the subject and “process” creating understanding between the subject and the researcher, both qualities regarded as essential for this study.

Life History involves understanding the life in question in depth (Bron and West 2000). Understanding the life in depth through a selection of experiences is assisted by connection to contextual and cultural elements of the life under review (Denzin 1970, Rubinstein 1995). Dominice (2000, p.178) emphasises the importance of a life history approach related to adult education. He suggests that biographical narratives within a life history approach give “access to the dynamics between their own lives and learning, [and] open the way to a better understanding of the conditions for learning in adult life”.

Denzin (1970) and Bron and West (2000) advocate life history methods as being a focused subjective approach. They comment that life histories result in “...celebrating... the diversity of people and their stories, and a more reflexive, transparent as well as humane research practice, and one that challenges over-socialised, over-determinist and reductionist narratives of people in their lifeworlds (Bron and West 2000, p.173). In accord with these subjective views, Kaufman (1994) suggests that having created the life history interaction, it is necessary to honour the response from the participant.

Tierney (2000) concludes that a key aspect of life history is in producing and developing a written perspective of the author’s purpose. However, he further relates (2000, p.549), “The work of life history has to be more than the celebration of my authorial voice.” He advocates, “...the work of life history ought to try to understand the conditions in which people live and work and die, so that everyone engaged in the life history – researcher, storyteller, reader – has the possibility of reconfiguring his or her life”.

As West (1996, p.46) further comments, life history research benefits from the collection of data in supportive contexts, as “...without them the understanding of motive, learning

and education, as well as of biographies and culture more generally, is impoverished...” Consequently, interviewing within supportive contexts was facilitated within this study.

### **Interviewing**

Interviewing was the data collection approach chosen for the purposes of this phase. It is a fitting existential ethnographic method for providing understanding of meaningful perspectives of a life history. The face-to-face interactive process of interviewing was chosen as the data production method for this phase, being a most appropriate qualitative method. It is beneficial in the understanding of meaning from life experiences (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Creswell 1998, Denzin and Lincoln 1998, Seidman 1998, and Patton 2002) and their situated contexts. While Seidman (1998) refers to meaningful understanding of experiences through interviews, Vygotsky explains (1987 in Seidman 1998, p.12), “The very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process”.

An emphasis was made on eliciting interviewee responses that were restricted as little as possible by organisational or structural limitations. The level of interviewer control over the interview process can have influence upon the focus of responses from the subject. A highly structured interview is likely to restrict elements such as the choice of topic and the direction of flow of the interview, narrowing the choice of responses and therefore possibly constricting the discussion by the interviewee of his/her life experiences. To address this concern a semi-structured interview process was implemented. Denzin (2001) discusses the use of open-ended interviewing and the need to be flexible in formulating and asking questions within the interview in a non-regimented manner.

A preliminary activity focusing on epiphanies and turning point moments was initiated. Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p.77) emphasise that an active interview involves the need to inform the subject of “the topic areas to be explored and the positions from which exploration might embark”. Context areas for the specific events on ‘turning point moments’ (Appendix M) were incorporated from Seidman (1998) and from those related

by Erben (1998, p.7) in his discussion of necessary considerations prior to the biographical data collection. The 'turning point moments' document was thus formulated to assist focus for respondents to reflect on important events in their lives up to the present time that may well relate to epiphanies, and to locate these. In a sense, it provided the basis for the subject to outline and compile elements of a life review, in this case initiated by the research study in progress. Rubinstein (1995) discusses this instigation as one type of occurrence of a life review, and refers to the interactive outlook of Wallace (1992).

Questions for the focus group interviews, while having some flexibility of sequence, were followed in a more highly structured manner than occurred in Phase Three. A primary reason for this was in the seeking of responses based on similar questioning patterns between the groups, so that emerging concepts related to the question areas presented were more clearly perceptible. Some important emerging concepts from the focus groups, such as the role of involvement, the linkages between maturity, growing up and life experiences, and the modelling effect on others of agelessness characteristics, were utilised for concept development in Phase Three questioning. A range of open-ended questions was included in the biographical interviews to gain general background information on the subjects. The formulation of questions was also assisted by Seidman (1998), Ruth, Otnes and Brunel (1999), and by the specific interview content aims.

In addition, probes (Patton 2002) for general and contextual areas were incorporated into the interview proforma for potential use. Examples included: How did that occur? How did you respond to that [event]? What emotions did you feel? Did that lead to you following any patterns of behaviour or behaving differently? Possible probes related to transitional and situated contexts such as those on the 'turning point moments' sheet include observation of Denzin's (2001, p.87) Temporal Mapping. This relates "Who does what with whom, when, and where" and assists in location "...within the larger historical, institutional and cultural arenas that surround an individual's life" (Denzin 2001, p.37). For example, these probes assisted in relating how descriptors of age and learning might

apply to interactions and experiences in a range of contexts such as domestic or community involvement. Examples from the interview proforma included:

- You mention that... location/place, people... how did that affect what happened?
- Are these turning point moments related to family – tell me more about your family at the time? Were your children going to school? What was your partner doing? Describe your relationship with...
- Are these turning point moments related to education or workplace (the work you were doing...)?
- Are these turning point moments related to social situations including friends?
- Are these turning point moments related to retirement and death?
- Did what was happening in society at that time affect...?
- How was that related to age? How was that related to learning?

### **The interactive role of the interviewer**

Apart from the structure of the interview, the production and understanding of data is an interactive process and as such it is important to give recognition to the role of both parties in an interview (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Silverman 2000). Seidman (1998, p.16) emphasises that in qualitative research there is open acknowledgement of the interactive role of the interviewer in searching for meaning within the data gathered by interviewing. Dorr-Bremme (in Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p.16) refers to an interview's "...continual, implicit, interactional negotiation between researcher and respondent as they read one another's evolving behaviour". It is understood that the analysis of interview transcripts is more than objective reflection on the self-reflections of another, and is in reality a subjective interaction.

The responses from the subjects arise from interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer is actively present and interactively responsive to the narrative of the interviewee. Moreover, awareness needs to be made of powerful elements in the interaction. While minimising influence on the process, the interviewer does play an active, subjective role in the interview (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). As Denzin

(2001, p.42) asserts, "Value-free interpretive research is impossible... every researcher brings his or her preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied".

Positive benefits of interaction can be assisted by skilled responses of the interviewer and recognition of the involvement occurring. For example, benefits from theoretical sensitivity within the interviews can improve later theoretical coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990 in Denzin and Lincoln 1998), and further benefits can arise from having background experience (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) or by demonstrating non-verbal communication cues. Factors such as these can assist in perception of nuances, and in developing understandings within the data collection process.

The interviewer can play a significant role in the telling of narratives within the interview. Kvale (1996) suggests that this occurs by allowing spontaneous stories to be recounted, by encouraging coherence by means of adding an analogy, by actually asking for stories, and by helping the structuring of events into stories. Denzin (2001, p.98) maintains there is a "double crisis" of legitimation and representation in interactive research. He states firstly that "...It is now understood that social scientists are not aloof, objective observers of cultures and their processes..." He further refers to this "legitimation crisis" as being deeper than merely describing culture and more, in Lather's (1991) term, that "...they inscribe it". Awareness of this subjective involvement assists in thoughtful understanding of concepts regarding trustworthiness of the data analysis.

Denzin's (2001, p.98) second part of his "double crisis", the crisis of representation, is the likely realisation of the difficulty of the transfer from the narrative to written text as this might be viewed as "...created in the social text written by the researcher". The researcher's crafting of the narrative and the presentation style of the written report, as discussed later, needs to be carefully considered so that the individuality and uniqueness of the subject are apparent. The concept of 'narrative smoothing' is discussed later in the section 'Basis for the presentation style', in relation to Spence (1986 as cited in Polkinghorne 1995) and Barone (2001).

An important additional issue is what Denzin (2001, p.144) refers to as “Deconstructing the phenomenon of interest”. Prior knowledge and interest in the topic by the interviewer can create a ‘mind-set’ that could lead the interviewer to interpret the topic in terms of possible expectations. While this part of the study was fascinating and instructive in actively listening to the three subjects as they recounted important events and moments of their lives, the transcripts of these descriptions have been carefully considered to try to discern and to reduce interpretation in terms of any related researcher expectations.

There is a range of emotional factors that arise within the interactive interviewing process. West (1996) discusses her discomfiture at the disclosure of personal information in the interview situation. In the discussion of a life history, the emotional importance of disclosed information can be unclear to the researcher, despite paralinguistic clues being of assistance. For example, in the present study the disclosure of turning points/epiphanies in a life is elicited. Responses could include discussion of the death of a loved one, a traumatic event or the memory of a more favourable time than the present. The response from the researcher, while skilled in eliciting information, may not be able to demonstrate a required sensitivity to the information that arises. Dominice (1994) and West (1996) raise issues related to response to elicited sensitive information, with West (1996, p. 214) remarking, “...I frequently felt lost and uncertain in particular interviews: about how far to allow a conversation to proceed.”

In this study, the varying cultures of the participants may have assisted in reducing undue influence in interpretation, as it has ensured a search for meaning from experiences alternative to and clearly outside those experienced by this researcher. Examples include the experiences of one subject who was a child in Vietnam at the time of the Vietnam war, and another who was living on an Australian island many years ago, at a time of governmental racially influenced travel restrictions. However, emotionally there was an engagement by both the interviewee and interviewer. For instance, as one participant remembered people who had influenced her past and had suffered hardship and racial influence in their lives, and as another participant remembered childhood images of a

war. While it is not suggested that the data gathered from this study was more or less valuable from emotional interaction, it is noted that the emotional interaction occurred.

### **Narrative**

The interviewer's responsiveness to the interview situation is important in achieving interview aims (Patton 2002). For this study, the meaningful construction of life elements for the individuals being studied was obtained through development of a narrative for each participant. Interviews can provide a narrative account of expressed human events in linguistic and meaningful form. Kvale (1996, p.200), following Mischler (1986), proposes that interviews be regarded as narratives. He discusses a narrative as incorporating "...a *temporal* sequence, a pattern of happenings. It has a *social* dimension, someone is telling something to someone. And it has a *meaning*, a plot giving the story point and a unity". Polkinghorne (1988, p.11) defines narrative as, "...a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions".

As this study is a socio-culturally situated practice, contextualisation of what arose within the interviews was of particular importance. The situated context of such events was established through extensive use of probe questions, related in particular to Denzin's concept of Temporal Mapping (2001).

As Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p.55) declare, "Narrative complexity requires an interview format that accommodates contextual shifts and reflexivity". There are complexities within the biographic narrative process that it is necessary to acknowledge in choosing a focus from which to view the life histories of a study. It is acknowledged that perspectives of narratives can be many-sided. As Richardson (1997, p.92) asserts in utilising the metaphor of the crystal, "...combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter but are not amorphous". Similarly, the multifaceted responses to each participant's life history have dimensions that could be

likened to the crystal metaphor. Cognisance of Barone's (2001, p.156) understanding of multiple meanings from a narrative can assist in resisting structural interference within the interview, consequently allowing the flow of the respondent. He asserts that there is a restrictive nature in the literature as "Unambiguous texts emitting an air of final authority are indeed suited to a decision-making process that is convergent, terminal, summative".

### Procedure

The Phase Three interview process chosen as appropriate for this phase of the study followed that described by Seidman, originally developed by Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited in Seidman 1998). This process involved interviews on the subject's life up to now, their present experience, and making meaningful reflection on their life experiences. As Seidman (1998, p.12) affirms:

The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives.

An overview of the key aims discussed within the process known as Seidman's (1998) Three Interview Series is shown as Table Three.

**Table Three: Seidman's (1998) Three Interview Series**

INTERVIEW	Focus
ONE	Life histories until the present/now and situated contexts Epiphanies and turning-point moments
TWO	Present life situation and situated contexts Where are they now in their lives? Phases One and Two key emerging concepts
THREE	Perceptions of their future. Relate what has happened to them to key



	research questions and issues arising from the focus groups. Reflection and link to research questions and situated contexts
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The procedure for data collection in this phase follows. As this phase continued building theory related to study aims, a process that provided the potential for supplementing depth and understanding of the participants, their experiences and the situated contexts was needed. Having chosen prospective information-rich subjects for this phase of the study, it was necessary to reflectively examine, prior to development of the interview proformas, what these participants were likely and potentially able to provide. This was important in terms of considering the stories of their life histories and was viewed as a filter through which deeper understandings of their observations could be made, with perceptual questions on the subjects being posed by the interviewer, such as who are they, what are they like, and what made them who they are?

In preparing for the interviews, the place of interview and the mode of recording the interaction were considered carefully. The place for interview followed Creswell's (1998, p.124) suggestion of, "...a quiet location free from distractions". Audio taping of the interviews was utilised, as in Phase Two, with similar considerations of effectiveness without disturbance of interactive response being made. Process notes (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) were also utilised both during and after the interviews for assistance with clarity of interpretation.

Questions were formulated for the semi-structured interviews based on the following discussion content:

- related to the research questions
- from the evolved descriptors and emerging themes from Phase One and Phase Two
- taking into account possible constraints provided by situational contexts, such as business, home or community

- whether adaptation and the ability to adapt were enhanced by critical life events/epiphanies was addressed. Are subjects responding according to situated context, enabling a choice of utilising a trait?
- responses to critical changes in surrounding support systems that call for adaptation and ‘new learning’, leading to perceived personal agelessness, concept development
- cultural perceptions related to age and learning
- follow-up questions based on the previous interview(s) with the subject

A trial interview with one person occurred. After trialling it was apparent that while the turning point moments document (Appendix M) was useful for focus, it did not appear important or necessary for it to be completed carefully. The life timeline (Appendix L) was altered in format after the trial to be more ‘user-friendly’ for the interviewee visually. Whether the interview questioning format was too highly developed was considered. It was decided that the semi-structured nature of the questioning was useful, and did not need any alterations as flexibility and flow occurred. The open-ended discussion questions being followed by probes appeared to be valuable in assisting the interviewer to cover key content related to interview aims within the proforma.

Contextual placement of participants’ experiences was the aim of the first interview. The second interview was to “concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman 1998, p.12). The focus in the third and final interview stage included reflections on past experiences and circumstances, and their impact on the present. Future perceptions of the participants were also addressed.

Overall, the three interviews assisted in providing an understanding of the subjects’ life histories, their experiences and located contexts, and the strength of relatedness to key study concepts. The emerging narrative from this method is facilitated by the questions formulated for each of the past, present and reflective focused interviews. However, flexibility of questioning process within the interviews occurred, with question order

frequently changed due to interviewee progression of comments. Also Kvale's (1996) strategies for the telling of narratives were utilised in the interviews, such as spontaneous stories, analogies and structuring into stories. Discussion of events and perceived consequences was explored by creating an interactional environment. In the interviews for this phase, this included showing interest in the responses by demonstrating active listening skills, such as by encouraging body language or by summarising content, as a result promoting further development of discussion.

In the first interview the initial consideration was for the subject to feel comfortable with the process and to establish rapport with the interviewer. Cannell, Miller and Oskenberg (1981, p.75) relate this as being "...a positively affective and personalized interactive style". The introduction to the interview is thus significant as an influential and inherent part of the interview to follow (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Also, the introduction assisted the subject to further understand the content focus of the interview. In the interviews, this occurred by means of explaining the study in accordance with Phases One and Two, and asking what might be termed as stereotypical speech questions relating to the participant's health.

The basis of the questions formulated for the first interview (see Appendix N) related primarily to facilitating the respondents' discussing in detail experiences and contexts of their lives up to this point in time. In particular the questions emphasised how these events occurred, thus providing the basis for considered interpretation and understanding (Seidman 1998, Denzin 2001). At the end of each of their three interviews, participants were asked to respond to the interviewer's summary of the interview at the time, and to clarify any perspectives necessary.

As the first interview was related to the participants' lives up to the present time, part of the interview explored connections to emerged epiphanies. This interview discussed:

- the context of their present life situation, such as perceptions of where they are now in their lives, including the situations and location of contextual information, which Seidman (1998, p.12) relates as “The details of the experience”.
- their understanding of key concepts of the present study
- any linkages they may perceive between the emerged epiphanies of their lives and their presenting of behaviour, thoughts or ideas related to concepts of age and descriptors of agelessness, and to lifelong learning
- issues arising from the data obtained in Phases One and Two
- responses related to research questions of this study

Seidman (1998, p.12) suggests that the second interview “...concentrate on the concrete details of the participant’s present experience in the topic area of the study... reconstruct the details... put their experience within the context of the social setting”. This included relationships, their present experiences and focusing on the key study variables of links to agelessness, age, lifelong learning and social wellbeing. To achieve these aims participants were asked “...to reconstruct a day” related to the topic “from the moment they woke up to the time they fell asleep” (Seidman 1998, p.12).

In Interview Three, in accordance with Seidman (1998, p.12) the basis of the interview was to “...reflect on the meaning of the experience... [the] intellectual and emotional connections between the participant’s work and life”. Probes were also used to elicit further details from the subject on responses given. In-depth discussion of these reflections, together with situated contextual linkages, was made. Following this, a self-assessment of personal beliefs related to the topic, based on Seidman (1998), was explored: “What does it mean to you to have agelessness qualities... be a lifelong learner... have social wellbeing?”

Further questioning in Phase Three regarded contemplation of the past and present influences with questions linked to key study variables such as, “Given what you have said about your life before... and given what you have said about now, how do you understand agelessness/ lifelong learning/ social wellbeing in your life?” In particular,

questions were asked concerning the importance of epiphanies and turning points in their lives, and their learning now. Also, answers were contextually connected. Letting spontaneous stories appear was encouraged (Kvale 1996), to assist explanations from the participant and understanding by the researcher. In regard to Barone's (2001) multiple meanings from a narrative, there was also an openness in this study toward reducing interviewee expectations by not requiring definitive answers.

Further discussion focused upon enabling subjects to reflect on the past, the present and link these experiences to possible future orientations by asking "Given what you have constructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future?" This question was followed up with probes such as, "How will age affect that? How will learning be a part of that? How is good health important in this?" Other choices of areas of focus included perceptions of change, choice in actions, and identity and maturity issues, mainly arising from earlier data in this study. The participants' responses to a recalled experience were also addressed, involving aspects such as a significant other, exploration of the place of occurrence, the time period, and any perceived culturally-linked experiences.

## **Data analysis**

### ***The basis for the data analysis***

It was considered imperative that a coherent link was made between the stages of collection of data, the analysis process, and the presentation format of results in addressing the aims of this phase. The section begins with a description of the analytic approaches and techniques used in the analysis. An explanation of how the analysis was done and implications of this process are given, as well as discussion of factors affecting the chosen presentation style of the report.

The process followed emphasises that it is essential to analyse the stories told rather than to construct the stories from what has been said. The subjects of this phase of the study

are not, as Tierney (2000, p.545) suggests, "...the objects of our discourses, but rather the agents of complex, partial, and contradictory identities that help transform the worlds they and we inhabit".

Consideration was given to differing approaches for analysing the narratives that were not utilised in the study. Varying forms of discourse analysis were considered but not chosen, as this process primarily "identif[ies] different ways of talking... rather than addressing the actual experiences" (Silverman 2000, p.34). Ethno-methodological process using conversational analysis, which emphasises naturally occurring conversations (Garfinkel 1967, Denzin and Lincoln 1998), while assisting close focus on small sections of data, was not thought appropriate to this study due to a narrowness of focus preference, thought to be limiting to elements of the research environment (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

In choosing a technique for analysis of the Phase Three interviews, it was appropriate and consistent to use a narrative analysis approach. Narrative was chosen for the analysis of this study as it considered overall meanings from the experiences described in the interview data, obtained through the storied lives of the respondents. In Phase Three, in accord with the qualitative approaches earlier discussed, narrative analysis techniques have been utilised consistent with the influences of Polkinghorne (1995), Munro (1998), Seidman (1998), and Barone (2001).

The analytic process employed considered a number of the complexities of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. While there are a number of possible analytic techniques related to narrative analysis of data, the approach chosen is cognisant of, and demonstrates, the distinctiveness of the case studies in both the analysis process and in the presentation format.

In generating an understanding of key factors of the study such as agelessness, the formation of story concepts from the data is of benefit. Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p.56) assert that the aims of the active interviewing process are:

...to gather information about what the research topic is about and to explicate how knowledge concerning the topic is narratively constructed. Findings, then, come in two intertwined forms: data about the subject matter of the research and data about how that subject matter is organized in respondents' narrative experiences.

In order that these aims are realised, Polkinghorne (1995, p.18) suggests development of a process "...to provide a story line or plot that serves to configure or compose the disparate data elements into a meaningful explanation of the protagonist's responses and actions". A plot will, it is advocated, provide a transparent framework from which to analyse and interpret the data. According to Hatch (2002, p.205), "Narrative analysis is a strategy for constructing stories (emplotted narratives) from data. The basic analytic activity involves developing or discovering a plot that links the data together".

Denzin (2001) emphasises the importance of non-literal perceptions. He relates that it is important to discover the theories in terms of which the storied experiences of the subjects are described. These deeper interpretations are, according to Denzin (2001), symbolic in nature, and relate to their own context, as well as giving insights into aspects of identity, in the way the subjects dealt with elements of crisis in their lives.

Thoughtful deliberation was also given to other influences on interpretation and understanding of the text. This concern was mindful of Kvale's (1996, p.223) observation that "...different questions put to interview texts lead to different answers". Kvale further (1996, p.226) refers to Lather's (1995) variations on the way a text is read. These are, "...a realist reading... of finding the text's essence and truth... A critical reading... seeking a truth beyond ideologies and false consciousness... [and] A deconstructive reading... [where] the text is read as documentation for its unconscious silences and unspoken assumptions".

Dollard's (1935) narrative guidelines (in Polkinghorne 1995) were also considered; these involve key contextual elements of cultural context, physical bodily aspects, significant others in the events described, locus of control issues, historic continuity, the generation of a story, and plausibility and understandability of what has occurred.

### ***Basis for the presentation style***

The decision of how to structure the storied dialogues was not made until the analysis was undertaken. It was felt that restrictions of trying to fit the analysis into a pre-prepared format would have a detrimental effect on meaningful understanding of the data and the descriptive analysis presentation. In written presentation of the narrative analysis a number of important aspects need to be considered. Issues of consequence to be cognisant of include stylistic conflict, narrative smoothing, the degree of intrusion, and demonstrated presence.

Firstly, the stylistic conflict between the written presentation style of the researcher and the spoken style and non-verbal communication of the subject is discussed by Polkinghorne (1995), who recommends Spence's (1986) 'narrative smoothing' of the data to form a more polished account of raw transcripts. However, Tierney (2000, p.544), in disagreeing, comments with some irony:

If we are to believe the vast majority of life histories that exist, those individuals whose lives have been reported are among the most grammatically correct and logical speakers we know; they speak in complete sentences and they develop ideas in chronological sequence.

A degree of intrusion along a continuum of subjectivity and objectivity in biographical writing is discussed as a necessary consideration by Clifford (1970). Denzin (2001, p.1) relates how, in his view, "Writers must be openly present in their texts and must make their values clear". Richardson (1994) further suggests that in writing about interactions with research subjects, it is authentic to understand that the writing is not objectively



separate from ourselves and that the researcher is present, even if he or she is often superficially hidden in the writing. In this study, authenticity is regarded as genuineness of behaviour. For example, in narrative writing it is authentic, according to Richardson (1994), to be aware that the researcher's presence influences what is written. Furthermore, West (1996) regards being authentic, an individual's effort to act in an open and genuine manner, to be a salient part of selfhood.

Richardson (1994) further discusses her view that the need in qualitative research is for our research to be read widely, and for the writing process to be acknowledged as not merely reporting on research but as a component of our own learning process. As a part of this acceptance of the interactive role she recommends that authentic writers be demonstrably present in a more actively participatory writing style.

Tierney (1997) argues for experimentation in presentation of narratives, purporting that it is not enough to demonstrate presence, and believing that the existing methods of author declaration in text such as referring to 'I' or 'the interviewer' are not sufficient in demonstrating the researcher's role. He asserts that such a strategy "...posits the author as a researcher who unproblematically collected data and then presented it. Any sense of the author's role in the creation of reality is absent" (p.27). However, as Tierney (1997) acknowledges, demonstrating awareness of why a style was chosen is crucial.

### *The data analysis process*

The following section describes how this analysis framework was applied for this study. The data in Phase Three consisted of full transcripts from three interviews of approximately one to one and a half hours, from each of the three respondents. In this study a basal chronological order for the data (Polkinghorne 1995) arose from questions relating to the past in the first interview, the present in the second interview, and upon reflection on the past and present with consideration to the future in the third interview (Seidman 1998).

Chronological order was not followed definitively in the actual interviews, as the telling of the subject's life by the subject, with a minimum of structural guidance, was sought. However, the interview schedule itself was more structurally aligned to chronology. In consequence, the numbering system of the questions was entered onto the appropriate places on the transcripts, providing access to chronology when analysing. Initial formation of story concepts in chronological order from the data was constructed using a story line or plot (Polkinghorne 1995, Hatch 2002).

However, Polkinghorne (1995) further proposes the initial seeking of salient data to the interview purpose. For this purpose a thematic analysis was initiated. To achieve this, each interview transcript was highlighted for those comments and statements that on initial observation might be meaningful. Following grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), memos and notes were made on the transcripts, and different colours used to accentuate potential differences. Furthermore, the parts not highlighted were focused upon, re-considered, and pondered upon as to potential words, phrases, or events that might be perceived to have significance either by what is said or what is sometimes not said, complementary or contradictory to the narrative as a whole.

Lather's (1995) text reading variations (in Kvale 1996) were considered in the choices for highlighting and had the following key characteristics: that they were coming from the researcher as meaningful, including awareness of the interactive role of the interviewer, and that they were significant to the participant, both consciously and perceived by the interviewer as unconscious – this could include the order in which they start talking, the emphasis made, and the seeming 'side-tracks' and inferences. Characteristics linked to research were also indicated at this time.

In attempting to obtain meaningful understanding from the transcribed texts of the interviews, the search for deeper, non-literal meaning is critical. As suggested by Althusser (in Grele 1985, cited in Perks and Thomson 1998, p.45), this listening is "...for insight and oversights, for the combination of vision and non-vision, and especially for answers to questions which were never asked..." Delving deeper into contextual

elements related to non-literal aspects unravelled from the transcripts of the interviews was endeavoured, and provided the basis for thick descriptive reporting (Denzin 2001). Furthermore, Denzin (2001, p.127), in relating the necessity of linking the analysis to elements of how the analysis is reported, states that, "Thick description incorporates context, interaction and history".

In analysing the transcripts, Kvale's understanding of Mischler's (1986 in Kvale 1996, p.200) three salient dimensional elements was taken into account to assist analysis. These are described as: "a temporal sequence", "a social dimension" and "a meaning, a plot". These elements were recognised through the chronological ordering, contextual linkage and plot unravelling that ensued in deeper analysis of the transcripts. As in Phase One, the thematic analysis was assisted by data being left for several days. Consequently re-focusing on previously highlighted parts assisted development of potential thematic groupings. A significant part of the process now followed regarding the grouping together of significant sections (Silverman 2000) based on cause and influence (Polkinghorne 1995).

Utilising Dollard's (1935) guidelines, a plot outline (Polkinghorne 1995) was formed prior to the report. This led to the eventual denouement of the subjects as they displayed characteristics related to key themes of the study. The plot for each individual studied provides the basis for writing the storied exposition. As Polkinghorne (1995, p.16) advocates, "The final story must fit the data while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves". The synthesised story arising as a result of the above process took cognisance of some quintessential elements of Dollard's (1935) narrative guidelines. It is presented here that the connections and concepts developed, while not necessarily falling into neat patterns, emerged in authentically built and tested theory and understanding related to Phase Three aims. In effect, the telling of a new story was based on the elicited interview stories (Kvale 1996).

The headings for the sections of the case study were chosen because the aims, data collected and analysis suggested that they would be important in all three case studies.

Furthermore, the headings reflected key areas to be addressed in the study. The headings selected were:

The participant's journey;

Epiphanies;

Childhood context;

Moving on;

Learning;

Age and agelessness;

Self-responsibility;

Resource characteristics;

Response to change;

and Reflections.

The heading order varied, dependent upon interviewee emphasis on particular remembrances and upon the overall flow of the narratives. The section on reflections consisted of interviewer reflections on the narratives to draw together disparate responses. Interviewee reflections were incorporated into the other narrative sections.

#### ***The basis for the cross-case analysis***

The process followed in the cross-case analysis provided a coherent link between data collection, as reflected in the narratives, the process of the analysis, and the presentation of results from the analysis.

The cross-case analysis of the narratives utilised the earlier discussed narrative analysis methods from the individual case studies. Emphasis was given to "the subject matter of the research and data about how that subject matter is organized in respondents' narrative

experiences” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, p.56). Consideration and understandings of data from the narratives in regard to the research questions of the study was focused upon, as well as understanding of further dominant themes and nuances arising from the data.

The data for the cross case analysis consisted of narratives for each of the three case studies examined within Phase Three of the study. To ensure consistency with analysis of the individual case studies the process followed for analysing the narratives was in accord with Polkinghorne (1995), Munro (1998), Seidman (1998), and Barone (2001). Furthermore, as there was a similar format for the presentation of results for each of the narratives, close comparison of each of the sections of the narratives was enabled.

#### *The cross-case analysis process*

Initially each of the narratives was considered carefully, with particular emphasis given to Lather’s (1995) text reading variations (in Kvale 1996) of realist, critical and deconstructive readings. Kvale (1996, p.227) suggests that the different readings “...involve different questions posed to the text and lead to different answers about the meaning of the text”. The readings were made to assist in meaningfulness and significance at a conscious and unconscious level with a focus on deeper non-literal elements of the data.

In the cross-case analysis, a thematic analysis was instigated. The techniques of grounded theory related to coding were utilised (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Code notes and memos (Strauss and Corbin 1998) were made before axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), as discussed earlier, was followed to explore property categories and to develop a depth of category understanding. Colour coding was utilised to assist in differentiation and emergence of themes within the data. Sub-categorisations of key elements of the analysis were considered for dominant themes emerging from the data, and for linkage to other contextual information from within the narratives.

To ensure consistency between the analysis of the individual narratives and the cross-case analysis the key contextual elements of Dollard (1935 in Polkinghorne 1995) received close consideration. These elements were cultural context, physical bodily aspects, significant others in the events described, locus of control issues, historic continuity, the generation of a story, and plausibility and understandability of what has occurred. Elements not linked, at this stage, were further considered for possible linkages or for new categories or understandings. Overt and perceived meanings from the data were sought throughout the cross-case analysis.

The cross-case presentation followed a thick description style that "...incorporates context, interaction and history" (Denzin 2001, p. 127). Themes and sub-themes emerging from the analysis were related to key study variables regarding agelessness, lifelong learning and social wellbeing.

#### *The presentation style procedure*

The cardinal consequence of the story, unfolded within the written analysis of the interviews, should demonstrate the unique distinctiveness of the subject within the rich context of their experiences (Polkinghorne 1995). To enhance this individuality it was decided that for each case there would be a separately written, summarised narrative enabling the existential ethnographical life history of each subject to be focused upon. These summarised narratives explore key issues such as implicit themes, commonalities, comparisons and contrasts to better present the uniqueness and richness of each story. The presentation style chosen incorporates content and social context descriptions, for example, in relating a turning point described by one of the subjects. In addition, the situated social context is related to the event, providing contextual embedding of the narrative.

The intention of the presentation format chosen is to draw meaning from information provided in the interviews framed into a narrative theoretical analogue. Munro (1998) presents a narrative subject-to-fiction format by using a combination of interviews

describing the lives of her subjects. The narrative format chosen for this study follows a similar structure by, in particular, forming the life histories by making insights that are derived from the interview interactions. These include insights from the literature review and personal perspectives of the researcher. The addition of these links can be viewed as changing what has been presented from life story to life history.

It is important to emphasise that this analysis was made of the stories the subjects told, rather than by constructing stories from what has been said. The storied style followed presented experience and the meaning of experience in a particular way. The presentation style for this study therefore, while incorporating primarily the views of the subject, also relates research linkages and includes the direct interactional presence of the writer. This presence is consistent with the earlier part of the process in this phase that acknowledged the open involvement of the interviewer during the interviews.

This study acknowledges researcher presence and involvement in the textual presentation, while minimising influence detracting from the subject's story. As such, the spoken quotations from the subjects given within the analysis have been minimally adjusted for flow and understanding, and have often included language idiosyncrasy and spoken phrasing in the manner utilised in the interviews by the subject. This retained the individual nature of the subject's spoken style of communication. However, changes have been made from the original transcripts to correct conversational English as long as the purposes of this phase of the study were not compromised, as a mark of respect to the participants. It is believed that this did not create an artificial smoothness to the interview extracts utilised in the study. The artificial smoothness of the adjustment of transcribed text as advocated by Spence (1986 as cited in Polkinghorne 1995) is contrary to the analytic concepts of this phase discussed earlier and was not practised. Barone (2001, p.162) concurs with this criticism of 'narrative smoothing' by condemning the practice as "literary deceitfulness".

While researcher presence within the analysis is demonstrated within the reports, conscious attention was given to avoiding interference with the uniqueness of the

subject's presentation style (Denzin 2001). The effect of declared presence would seem more in keeping with the style for presentation within this research study. Consequently, the authentically declared presence of the researcher (Richardson 1994) is not viewed in this study as a negative perspective.

This study, while being aware of potential criticisms from Tierney's (1997) position on experimentation in narratives, advocates that openly acknowledging the researcher's interactive role in the research gathering process is what is salient, and that 'I' or 'the interviewer' are terms understood by the reader and are not detrimental to interviewer involvement. The demonstration of elements of subjective interviewer linkage to the data gathered, and to research literature connections in what might be viewed as an interactional presentational style, is suggested as appropriate for representing data obtained from methods utilised within this study.

Furthermore, in this study, it is felt that the open representation of researcher questioning and personal linkages made, far from intruding on the narrative of the subject, can be viewed as visible signs of personal grappling with the complexities of the exposed experiences of the subjects. As Denzin (2001, p.32) asserts, "Interpretive research begins and ends with biography and the self of the researcher".

In reporting, the interviewees' disclosures were presented in accord with discussed ethical considerations. While no distorting or misrepresenting was made, some fictionalising of the identity occurred. For example, if there was an important issue discussed then the primary need was to be candid to a prospective reader of the dissertation about presenting key pieces of information, but in such a way that the informants could not be identified, taking account of the relatively small community from which the sample of the study was drawn.



### 3.8 Trustworthiness of the data

In discussing validity of the data obtained throughout this study it is suggested that trustworthiness is used as an interchangeable term for validity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Traditional views of triangulation linked to validity are often restrictive within a qualitative study. In this study it is contended that the value of the data can be assisted by an awareness of trustworthiness of the process utilised. The use of multiple methods can be viewed as triangulation (Silverman 2000), while Hatch affirms that focus group data is a beneficial process in promoting trustworthiness through triangulation. However, Richardson (1997) asserts that the notion of triangulation is limited, and discusses the multifaceted advantage of likening the process to that of crystallisation, as earlier mentioned. As Kvale (1996, p.241) summarises, “Validation comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship during investigation, continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings”.

Both Phases One and Two provided trustworthiness of the methods utilised through a detailed and systematic process of method preparation and data collection, as well as through grounded theory strategies such as constant comparisons. In Phase Three the interview process was Seidman’s (1998) Three Interview Series. According to Seidman (1998, p.19):

The structure of the three interviews, the passage of time over which the interviews occurred, the internal consistency and possible external consistency of the passages, the syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects of the passage, and the discovery and sense of learning that I get from reading the passage lead me to have confidence in its authenticity.

In all three participant interviews these characteristics of trustworthiness were addressed and satisfied in the terms discussed above. As part of the trustworthiness of the Phase Three interviews, ongoing summaries for clarity of meaning were used within the interviews. Furthermore, an overall summary of key points of each interview was

discussed with the respondent, with any necessary adjustments made to perceived understanding. A further benefit of this procedure was the encouragement of reflection on the interviews by the respondents. Consideration was given to the possibility of subjects reviewing the written narratives from each interview; however, it was decided that the ongoing summary process within the interviews provided the necessary feedback (Miles and Huberman 1994 in Kvale 1996) from the subjects on content. The three interview process, by building on past responses, “illuminates the next” interview (Seidman 1998, p.113). The interpretive approach taken involves active interaction of the interviewer and is based on interviewer perceptions. However, while accepting the interactive role of the interviewer, it was felt that further responses by the subjects to the interviewer’s perceptions could contaminate the data obtained.

Seidman (1998 p.20) emphasises that key underlying issues such as “our ways of knowing and of avoiding ignorance” are most important, rather than the terminology of validity or trustworthiness. How we employ what the subjects choose to tell us is dependent on our own perspectives. What the subjects choose to tell us of their existential experience is also dependent upon the development of intimacy and trust through the interview process (Kaufman in Gubrium and Sankar 1994). Also, choosing people who had been purposively chosen by authorities in the key study areas made it more likely that the participants were well known and perhaps even prominent in the general community. This had a benefit in assisting trustworthiness of the data by the availability in two of the cases of alternative biographical or autobiographical literature. Throughout these interactions with the subjects a rapport and trust developed between the subjects and the researcher. This connective affinity was demonstrated by the openness displayed by the subjects in the interviews, and by off-tape comments by the subjects that showed reflective sensitivity to what was expressed in the interviews. Furthermore, awareness of subjective involvement of the interviewer assists in trustworthiness of the data analysis (Denzin 2001).

### 3.9 Limitations

A limitation in Phases One and Two of the study arose through the selection of subjects on the basis of involvement in the university. The subjects for the exploratory study and focus groups were involved in formal education, and therefore were people who had chosen to learn through formal institutional courses. Consequently, for Phase Three it was thought preferable not to limit selection of interviewees to people who were working within the area of education and training. However, the authorities influencing choice of Phase Three subjects included university academic staff, albeit involved in areas of lifelong learning and the study of human development.

In Phase Two it would have been beneficial to have further focus groups so that the information obtained was more deeply grounded. The intention and scope of this study and the time available to the researcher, however, did not allow for such extended application. The two focus groups generated much valuable information on a range of issues, and confirmed and extended understandings of key variables in the study.

A limitation relating to a more traditional approach to triangulation (Burns 2000) of Phase Three of the study might appear to be in the lack of cross referencing from outside sources for the information given by the respondents. However, this phase of the study is based on interviewees' perceptions of the lives they have lived and the interviewer's perceived linkages to lifelong learning and agelessness, and is not claimed, or intended, to be a documentation of 'facts' about the lives of the subjects. Moreover, the data in this phase are often about what the subjects believe has made a difference in their lives, and no amount of supporting data will provide confirmation of, or dispute the comments authentically made.

However, as the information supplied arose in the course of the interviews, due caution was taken in creation of an interview process likely to support trustworthiness, including the summarising and clarification of key issues within the interview process, as necessary. Support for the information subjects supplied has, it can be postulated,

emerged in the course of the interviews as people basically triangulated their own information by internal cross-referencing, for example, in discussing the same event at different times.

### **3.10 Summary**

This chapter described the methodology utilised in this study to enable its purposes to be achieved. It gave an overview of the three phases of the study, and the methods used in each phase of the research. For each phase the method chosen, associated procedures followed, and data analysis instruments and techniques utilised were discussed, as well as a consideration of trustworthiness and limitations of the data.

Chapter Four follows, and presents and discusses the results of Phase One and Phase Two. Chapter Five contains the analysis of the three situated biographical case studies and makes a cross-case comparison of the analysis of all three. Chapter Six summarises all three phases and draws conclusions for the dissertation. Characteristics of agelessness, lifelong learning and emergent themes and inter-relationships between key study variables are commented upon, as well as linkage to concepts of agelessness and lifelong learning from the literature.

## Chapter Four: Results and discussion of Phases One and Two

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the descriptive survey utilised in Phase One, and the interactions of the focus groups in Phase Two. Initially, the basis for categorising the emerged thematic areas in Phase One is discussed, before outlining the categories made, with examples given of representative characteristics and the Thematic Area Groupings (TAGs) formed. This is followed by a discussion of results.

Analysis of Phase Two data from focus group interactions is reported in sequence of question order from the developed focus group guidelines. In accordance with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998), and focus group analysis (Krueger 1998b), reciprocal shaping of the data was chosen in the analysis of key concepts. These concepts were related to topics evolved from the key research questions, the literature review, and Phase One conceptual developments.

The summary of data obtained from Phase One is presented below. The descriptive survey utilised for this part of the study endeavoured to establish characteristics of agelessness, and to assist in developing understanding of the concept, from the consideration of characteristics of people actually known by the participants who were thought to demonstrate agelessness.

### 4.2 Phase One: Exploratory Study

The survey responses, when analysed, yielded a wide range of **characteristics** related to agelessness. Characteristics with similar meanings were grouped together to form **categories**. **Sub-groupings** were made of the emerging categories according to the number of times a characteristic was mentioned and the range of characteristics mentioned in a category. **TAGs** were formed of collapsed groups of the categories.

### 4.2.1 Categories

Each subject response usually detailed between three and ten characteristics of agelessness. These were mainly stated as a single word, though some comments were as a phrase, for example, “loves to try different things” or “sense of humour”. Initial categories were made on the basis of the meanings of characteristics mentioned by the subjects. An illustration is the category formed from characteristics such as adventurous, resourceful, bold, no fears, will always have a go, courage to succeed and fail, and loves to try different things. These characteristics were given a category name that encapsulated a dictionary meaning of risk-taking, “to act in spite of the possibility of loss”, for the range of characteristics. For the characteristics mentioned the emerged category was attributed as risk taker.

### 4.2.2 Sub-groupings

In order to gain an understanding of the incidence of the stated characteristics, sub-groupings were made on the basis of the extent and range of characteristics mentioned. Three sub-groupings of the categories were made. The sub-grouping termed ‘vigorous’ included the categories with the most frequently mentioned responses, in terms of the range of characteristics within the category, and/or the number of times some of the characteristics were repeated. A second sub-grouping of ‘significant’ was made for responses less frequently mentioned, though still having a considerable number of references. A third sub-grouping of ‘noteworthy’ was formed for characteristics and comments that were mentioned on at least several occasions.

The sub-groupings and the categories within them are:

Vigorous:

risk-taker, passionate, energetic, good communicator, positive thinker, free-thinker, unacknowledged perception of own age

Significant:

self-confident, non-conformist, enquiring mind, sense of fun/spontaneity, active, learns unrestricted by age, interacts widely with range of ages, physical appearance

Noteworthy:

caring, calm manner

### **4.2.3 Thematic Area Groupings (TAGs)**

The categories formed from the stated characteristics were collapsed and encapsulated as TAGs. A constant comparison and questioning process was followed for the initial categories through reflection on the thematic meanings inherent within the categories, and also considering whether the categories could be collapsed further. Meaningful TAGs were created from groups of the categories.

In Phase One five TAGs were identified. These are not ranked in any specific order and were:

- (1) Change
- (2) Involvement
- (3) Physical Appearance
- (4) Affirmative Mindset
- (5) Attitudes to Age.

Each is discussed in turn below.

- (1) Change

The area of change was chosen to encompass several categories. The TAG comprised four categories chosen as being reflective of Fullan's (1993) concept of "lifelong inquiry" as a basis for managing or adjusting to change. This TAG included the categories of risk-taker and free-thinker, both included in the vigorous sub-grouping, and enquiring mind and non-conformist, from the significant sub-grouping.

Examples of characteristics within these categories are discussed. For risk taker, specific characteristics such as adventurous and bold were typically stated, and comments such as "courage to succeed and fail" and "will always have a go" (as

earlier commented upon) were recorded. Free-thinker was typified by open-minded and broad-minded, with accounts of “open for new ideas” and “open to change” given. Enquiring mind included “asks why”, “curious”, and “confronting of ideas and topics”, while non-conformist was taken to relate to personal adaptability, and incorporated “not stereotypical”, “unrestricted by the attitudes of others” and “does his own thing”.

## (2) Involvement

Involvement was regarded as reflecting attributes concerned with commitment to living. The TAG of involvement was chosen to include the categories energetic, passionate, and good communicator, regarded as part of the vigorous sub-grouping, and active, from the significant sub-grouping. Energetic was associated with characteristics such as participates, persevering, vibrant, and vitality, with comments including “love of life” and “enjoys doing things”. Passionate characteristics were held to be enthusiasm and dedicated, with comments such as “thirst for life”, “contributes ideas, energy and skills” and “fire for life and people” being prominent. The good communicator category was held to comprise the sharing of sent and received messages through involvement, sharing views and values with others (Emmitt and Pollock 2000). It included characteristics of sociable, outgoing, assertive, friendly, and amplifying, with comments such as, “relates to most people as a peer”, “fit into any age group” and “good conversation and wisdom”, all being aspects of interaction with others. Some active category characteristics were physical, hard working and busy.

## (3) Physical appearance

This TAG was not commented upon as frequently as other groupings, though sufficient responses enabled its one category to be included in the significant sub-grouping. Physical representation was regarded as being a perception of the display of physical characteristics such as healthy, fit, athletic, and “look younger”. Physical features included “bright interested eyes” and “good skin” as examples. Attitude to physical appearance, the third area, was noted by comments such as “doesn’t try to look like they’re young or old”.



#### (4) Affirmative mindset

Affirmative mindset is the TAG name relating to attitudes, values and beliefs that involve choosing a way of life. Bandura's (1982) concept of self-efficacy, including a positive sense of belief, is a salient component of the affirmative mindset, as is positive expectations (Bennetts 2003). The TAG includes the vigorous sub-grouping category of positive thinker, significant sub-grouping categories of self-confident and sense of fun/spontaneity, as well as noteworthy sub-grouping categories of caring and a calm manner.

Characteristics encompassed by the category of positive thinker comprised strongly posited attitudes of optimistic and focused, with lesser mention of motivated, "not being self-limiting", and "thinks they can do anything at all". Self-confident incorporated "can do attitude", self-reliant, self-willed, and also bulletproof and indestructible. Sense of fun/spontaneity was frequently commented upon and included a sense of humour, as well as "bubbly" and "fun loving", with other comments such as "believes in having a good time". "Child-like behaviour" was also included within the sense of fun/spontaneity category, incorporating "big kid", "youthful play", "childlikeness-not childishness", and naïve. Caring for others included a wide range of comments such as helpful, accessible, understanding, loving, warm, compassionate, generous and kind, with "interested in others" and "cares about everyone" as typical related comments. A calm manner incorporated being relaxed with typically related characteristics of laid-back, non-stressed, calm and "doesn't worry".

#### (5) Attitudes to age

The attitudes to age TAG consisted of comments related to the attitudes to age perceived to be representative of the focus person. It included three categories: unacknowledged perception of own age, interacts widely with range of ages and learns unrestricted by age.

These characteristics related to a range of conceptual comments about perception of own age, such as, “surprised at own biological age”, “doesn’t worry about age”, “perceived physical appearance unrelated to age”, “young at heart”, and “comfortable with their age”. Interacts widely with range of ages included “relates easily to others of all ages”, and “doesn’t limit their occupations or activities to their age group”. Attitude to learning where age is not restrictive encompassed comments such as “young thinker”, and “learns new skills regularly”.

#### **4.2.4 Discussion of results**

The four TAGs of change, involvement, affirmative mindset and attitudes to age were adjudged to have comparable concentration of characteristics presented by the survey respondents. In regard to the placement of categories within the sub-groupings, demonstrating the extent and range of characteristics mentioned, there were adjudged to be similarities of balance of categories mentioned in either the vigorous and significant sub-groupings, either by the strength of categories included, or by increased numbers of categories shared between the vigorous, significant and noteworthy sub-groupings. However, the fifth TAG, physical appearance, was not so compellingly represented in the sub-groupings compared to the other TAGs.

For involvement there were three vigorous sub-grouping categories, while change and attitudes to age incorporated two vigorous categories. In addition, although affirmative mindset had only one vigorous category, it included a range of significant categories and the two noteworthy sub-groupings. All groupings apart from physical appearance therefore incorporated a number of categories from the vigorous and significant sub-groupings.

Although they were not asked directly, it can be inferred that participants understood and were comfortable with the term agelessness. The absence of questioning to ask for clarification of the term in the survey process, and the ease with which the participants engaged with the survey question would appear to indicate that this term, as described within this study, was readily understandable. It was noted that of the eighty-eight responses collected in this phase, only one was unable to think of a person demonstrating agelessness characteristics. It can be therefore be surmised that

the survey group appeared to have an unambiguous understanding of the term agelessness, in terms of the study definition.

Furthermore, the responses, being between three and ten characteristics for most participants, suggest that the person chosen by each subject was describable in some depth. As the term agelessness appeared to be clearly understood by the respondents, the person demonstrating characteristics of agelessness was more likely to be accurately reflected by the characteristics chosen.

#### **4.2.5 Summary of results**

The responses from the exploratory study presented some interesting preliminary data for use in later stages of this study. From the responses given, the physical appearance of the person thought to demonstrate agelessness characteristics was unlikely to be the most important criterion in comparison to other TAGs. This would appear to be at variance with the emphasis often placed on looking younger than chronological age in modern Western society.

Data from this question indicated that a range of characteristics was regarded as describing the concept of agelessness in terms of the study definition. However, on analysis they can be representing as five TAGs formulated to encapsulate the participants' views. Change, involvement, affirmative mindset and attitudes to age would appear to reflect a vibrant and productive attitude not restricted by age from which to enact potential life experiences.

### **4.3 Phase Two: Focus groups**

#### **4.3.1 Introduction**

Phase Two examines the key variables in seeking further understanding of the concept of agelessness. Situated agelessness characteristics and perceptions of how they arise are explored, for example, the influence of catalytic factors such as epiphanies or turning point moments in encouraging development of characteristics related to

agelessness. A salient area of interest is the relationship between locus of control and the TAGs previously derived from the Phase One methodology. These groupings are employed in Phase Two as a framework for the analysis of the transcripts of the tape recordings and written responses to the questions (see Appendix E – Focus group discussion guidelines), as described in Chapter Three.

#### **4.3.2 Situated contexts**

Groups were asked to relate characteristics to situated contexts of socio-cultural practice (Mischler 1986, Lave and Wenger 1991, Erben 1998, Barone 2001, Denzin 2001). Categories of situated contexts were related to Erben's (1998) local and societal contexts for specific events (see Table Two in Chapter Three) and took account of Denzin's (2001) Temporal Mapping process. When participants sought to identify the situated context from general backgrounds associated with everyday living, the context was identified as 'general everyday lifestyle'.

#### **4.3.3 Discussion of results: Topics one to seven**

The following discussion of results occurs in order of the stated focus group guidelines. After the interviews and prior to analysis it became apparent that there were correlations between the categories and TAGs that evolved from Phase One and the responses from the Phase Two focus groups. Accordingly, the results are presented using the TAGs from Phase One as an analytic frame.

In the Phase Two focus groups, as in the exploratory study, the participants appeared to have little difficulty in identifying a person who demonstrates agelessness characteristics. Again this would appear to indicate an understanding of the concept of agelessness and a consistency of usage of the contextual application of the term within the discussions as, after the introduction, the term was consistently used by participants without hesitation, and within the flow of uttered sentences.

Both groups spoke passionately about the topics raised and consensus was generally reached after enthusiastic discussions. This was indicated by frequent raised voices to ensure that the participant's comment was the next to be aired, and by noticeable and

animated non-verbal communication. The intensity, frequency, and emotional impact of response assist recognition of significance (Krueger 1998b).

### **TOPIC 1** Inter-generational issues

Participant comments were based on written responses to sentence stubs of “I believe older people view younger people as...” and “I believe younger people view older people as...”

Question: Is there a difference?

*(Probe: What is it?)*

Written responses assisted focus and speaker confidence, as previously discussed. As most people in the groups presented a verbal view of the topic, the written response might be considered to have supported the interactional process of the focus groups.

There was a common perception across both focus groups that people within the categories of older or younger people held generally negative views of each other's generations. It was suggested that older people viewed younger people as being not involved or active in society. It was also believed that younger people viewed older people as judgmental and lacking the capability to make a useful contribution to society. The suggestion that stereotyping of beliefs about a particular age group is a result of non-understanding and personal experience implies that there may be more complex perspectives than the simplicity of a stereotypical view. Also, the role of physical appearance in promoting stereotypes was raised, though not explored in depth.

There was a dominance of the view, in both groups, that there is a stereotypical way of looking at a differing generation based on age. Participants maintained that older people usually view younger people in a negative manner and attribute to them characteristics such as being irresponsible, selfish, lazy and unmotivated, with comments including, “I believe that older people view younger people as generally without responsibilities and not having any concerns beyond themselves and their immediate pleasures” and “lacking a work ethic”. However, there was also some

support for a more positive view that young people were a “hope for the future,” “movers and shakers” and “leaders”.

In a similar manner, the participants believed that younger people viewed older people mainly in stereotypically negative ways. Comments forcefully related that older people were outdated and even redundant, with suggestions that older people were “over the hill”, “out of touch with the modern world” and “not in touch with life as it really is”. A further negative area was condemnatory in suggesting that older people were “bossy, set in their ways and difficult to deal with”, “forever telling you what to do”, “how to live your life”, and “what the truth is”. Minimal support was given to a more positive view that some older people could provide assistance to younger people.

A view expressed in both focus groups was that each generational group viewed the other in a non-understanding way. Discussion occurred about the emotions aroused by this non-understanding, leading to suspicion, uncertainty and, it was suggested, simply fear. In connection with non-understanding, one interesting view expressed was the “sudden visual impact” of older people from a younger person’s perspective, and it was perhaps surprising that more discussion did not develop on this physical perspective.

Both groups suggested that an individual’s personal experience might be an important element in how stereotypical negative views were developed. Several older participants related examples of their experiences of stereotypical intergenerational behaviour demonstrated by younger students at university, with younger students displaying different behaviour toward older students from that displayed toward other younger students. The examples given would seem to be linked to a perception that younger people should respectfully relate to people of an older age. These examples included the treatment of older people as “people you should be kind to”, a view greeted by laughter in the group. Being called “sir” was another respectful labelling effect.

Both groups showed lively interest in this inter-generational topic, with similar salient points being made. There was no discernible difference in the perception of

stereotypical views due to the diversity in ages of the participants, though the older participants tended to give more examples in relation to older people's viewpoints.

The comments made were not explicit to any particular located context for specific events. Views of inter-generational perceptions were regarded in terms of general everyday lifestyle. It appeared that a category of age, whether regarded as older or younger, was seen as being restrictive. Consequently, responses from participants were made within the local contexts for a specific event of personal interactive contexts, learning/education contexts and a socio-cultural context.

The terminology of this question could, however, be limiting. The categories 'older' and 'younger', though drawn from the White House Conference on Aging 1995 (1996a), could be viewed by some as stereotypical labels in themselves, and responses could be deemed to have mirrored this stereotypical approach.

## **TOPIC 2**    Characteristics of agelessness (Linked to Research Question one)

Question: Think of a person who displayed characteristics of agelessness. Picture that person. What characteristics do they have that led you to think that?

*(Probes: How are these shown? Can you tell me more about those characteristics?)*

Many different characteristics of agelessness were discussed within the focus groups. The characteristics that emerged from the focus group discussions appeared to have close alignment with many of the categories that were outlined in the TAGs of the exploratory study, though with varying levels of support given. This occurred despite the data being analysed in accordance with grounded theory methodology and incorporated focus group analysis (Krueger 1998a), with no pre-determination of the emergence of characteristics.

Many of the characteristics raised in the focus groups involved mindset perspectives in response to personal choices in living. The importance of mental attitudes was a critical encompassing area and was reflected in discussions of ways to live related to age. The Phase One TAGs of change, attitudes to age, affirmative mindset and

involvement were frequently raised. Emphasis on positive thinking, a sense of humour and a sense of fun were repeatedly mentioned as being influential attitudes across a range of situations.

In the area of the change TAG, categories of risk-taker, non-conformist and enquiring mind were mentioned. Enthusiastic comments were made concerning the importance of risk-taking. The importance of an enquiring mind was also mentioned. An example of non-conformity given was someone “who’s been eighty for fifteen years” and referred to distinctive clothes worn. The comment was made that, “...when you see the washing on the line it’s certainly interesting”. Although free-thinker was not specifically mentioned, it could be inferred from the suggestions of individual ways of acting and in the perspectives of an enquiring mind. All of the characteristics discussed were determined as being present across a variety of life situations and therefore within the context of general everyday lifestyle.

Phase One involvement TAG categories of energetic, passionate, and good communicator were all raised. There was emphasis on energetic participation in many activities, with illustrations such as micro-light riding, sky-diving and roller skating given. Contextually, leisure involvement was the local context for specific events, though graphic examples from this category may have been utilised in preference to ones with a lesser visual impact. Less emphasis was given in the focus groups to the passionate category of characteristics, though enthusiasm and “a thirst for life” were commented upon. Being non-judgmental and open to listening, and also a good storyteller, were communication skills stressed by respondents as being related to agelessness. Strong support in one group was given to openness leading to “a love of everything”.

In the affirmative mindset TAG, the vigorous sub-grouping category of positive thinker, significant sub-grouping categories of a sense of fun/spontaneity and self-confident, and noteworthy categories of caring and a calm manner were all mentioned. A sense of fun and the ability to laugh were cogently connected with comments of “happy with the circumstances that were hers” and “spontaneousness that is labelled childishness and irresponsible by others”. Caring received only minimal attention with outward focus on empathising with others concerns, such as



“kind and generous, but makes no fuss about any of that. Seems surprised if it is mentioned as kindness”. This category was cross-linked to being a good communicator. Having a calm manner, though noteworthy in Phase One, received little mention in the focus groups.

Discussion falling within the TAG of attitudes to age included comments on the importance of mental attitudes to personal choice. Reflections on ways to live such as to “dare to be different” and “dare to be themselves”, would seem to be elements where self confidence (and risk-taking) are evident. Also, “a determination not to give up living” was a common thread of attitude to age in the discussions; one description was, “Her mind is still open. As receptive now as it was when she was young with new ideas interesting to her”.

Interestingly, within the physical appearance TAG, little mention was made of physical attributes other than “sudden visual impact”. This endorsed the response in the exploratory study where this category received the least attention of the five categories. The significance of mental attitudes was emphasised by the groups as more important than physical appearance.

Also, emphatic comments were made by a number of group members about expectations of maturing and growing up. The area of maturity and its relationship to “child-like behaviour” was discussed, with group members suggesting that child-like attitudes and actions might be linked to having a sense of fun/spontaneity. Acting maturely was regarded as acting stereotypically and not felt to display agelessness characteristics. Several comments referred to the need to resist “indoctrinating messages” from society, and to not growing up, seemingly in the sense of having a lack of personal freedom of thought and action. One respondent intriguingly referred to maturity as being “something that comes anywhere along the chronological age”, and there was a sense that the understanding of maturity was connected to encountering a range of life experiences, but in an age-restrictive manner.

An interesting discussion occurred in both groups on the positive modelling aspects of people demonstrating agelessness characteristics. Areas discussed in which such people might have a positive effect on others included as a role model, inspiration,

interesting companion, supporter, or as one participant asserted, “You always left her feeling better than when you arrived, and you always knew something more than when you arrived”. The effect on others’ lives produced by modelling agelessness characteristics is an area worthy of further examination.

Several contextual examples of what might be termed non-agelessness were given related to how stereotypical views of age were often demonstrated in individuals’ lifestyles. These examples of non-agelessness mentioned included young hairdressers in the workplace dressing and acting conservatively, as well as the observation from one participant that “...all the old people in my life are boring!” Following cultural patterns of ageing was talked about energetically. Another respondent described his father’s view of forthcoming retirement as, “...like living in a cloud of candy floss, pink, soft, you didn’t have to do anything, people looked after you, and there was nothing, it was just living in this thing of candy floss”.

Internal consistency was achieved in Topic Two, as in Topic One, with issues and comments elaborated on and few unclear comments made, factors suggesting a likelihood of internal consistency (Krueger 1998b). A limitation on the findings of Topic Two could be that although the comments were mainly associated with a person or persons that the participants held to demonstrate agelessness qualities, in some cases it was clear that the comments referred to the participant’s perceived view of their own demonstration of the characteristic. However, these comments were made within a framework of agelessness perceptions, in effect by regarding themselves as the agelessness person for that response.

Focus group participants appeared to regard the situated context of many of the characteristics they were describing as being part of what could be viewed as an identity template. Having attributed the agelessness characteristic, the demonstration of the characteristic often appeared to be regarded as applicable across a range of contexts and thus was incorporated, for the purposes of this study, within the general everyday lifestyle context category. Any exceptions to this view of characteristics applicable to a range of contexts were specifically stated, or illustrated by contextual examples related to a specific local or societal context for situated events.

**TOPIC 3** Exhibiting characteristics of agelessness (Linked to Research Question four)

Question: Can you think of why it is that some individuals show the characteristics of agelessness that you mention?

When discussing the provenance of agelessness characteristics, as in Topic 2, two views were advocated. One was the view that the characteristics were innate, while the other, in contrast, regarded such characteristics to be a product of environment and experience. In both groups there was a response that possessing characteristics of agelessness was innate, that in effect you were born with these characteristics or not, and therefore, following this view, that no choice of attainment was made by individuals. One respondent stated that, “It is an inner drive in some individuals. You always find some people never will do anything, and there will always be some who will be motivated”.

However, the focus groups overwhelmingly emphasised the influence of the environment, “the way they were brought up” through events or times within the culture. It was suggested that the environment experienced was most influential, particularly for the development of values, attitudes, and beliefs. While the influence of significant older others was also maintained to be a reason for agelessness characteristics to be displayed, the overall influence of society was advocated as particularly influential. The depression of the 1930’s to early 1940’s, a societal context for specific events, was used as an illustration of the influence of a social-cultural event in creating perceived non-agelessness responses. Risk-taking was reduced for people who had lived through the depression, according to members of one focus group. However, another group member rebutted this with, “The depression was in the 1930s and we’re in the 21<sup>st</sup> century now”, advocating that the locus of control is in the present, not the past. This does not rebut the fact that the people who lived through the depression continue to be affected by it.

Overall, this topic generated the least energy in discussion and had the fewest participants in the groups comment on it. Enthusiasm on responding to the question

was lacking and examples to follow up initially stated views were not given with any eagerness.

These findings are nevertheless of importance as part of a consideration of what may lead to attainment of characteristics of agelessness. Direct views of an innate source by some group members tended to change as the discussion developed, eventually becoming more related to specific or cumulative events that influenced an individual to choose to develop characteristics perceived as demonstrating agelessness.

**TOPIC 4** Critical life events and their influence on agelessness characteristics  
(Linked to Research Question five)

Question: Do you think that there are particular critical life events (something that happens in our lives that is the catalyst for change) that influence an individual's choices in attaining characteristics of agelessness?

*Question probe: What kind of events do you see as being critical to change in this way? (Further probe: Do you think or know that there was an incident, event, 'defining moments' or transition in life, in which the agelessness person you are thinking of showed that).*

Critical life events were described to the group as being something that happens in our lives as the catalyst for change. In discussing whether there are critical life events that influence an individual's choice in attaining characteristics of agelessness, there were responses, as in Topics Two and Three, in two main areas. Firstly, the view that attaining characteristics of agelessness was innate, made in the previous question, was expressed by the same group members for each group. Secondly, environmental factors were cited as being instrumental in change.

For a majority of group members, environmental factors were put forward energetically. Having the opportunity was forcefully posited as a major reason for agelessness characteristics being attained by some people. An enthusiastic discussion of the effect of societal context for specific events, such as the difficulties of being in a restrictive environment occurred. For example, a worker in an industrial setting in a

third world country was said to have a limited opportunity: “You have a look at people in India who when they’re four, they go out to work in a factory and they’re sold. They get that flash of agelessness, so what? They’re stuck, you know”.

However, upon considerable further discussion it was generally agreed that despite severe environmental difficulties, people are still able to make choices of demonstration of agelessness characteristics that they choose to develop in their own way.

The oldest member of the groups believed there was a cumulative effect brought on by social changes. She stated that, “Once grandmas were old people, now we’re into everything... we don’t have to sit back as somebody who has one foot in the grave any longer do we?” The cumulative influence of others’ expectations was also suggested by one participant, whose parents trusted him to be independent and, he believes, encouraged him to take risks in his life.

My parents right from when I was eight, would let me take out a few supplies and a fishing rod, and a little one man tent and go off for a couple of days. Now they knew I would be somewhere out in the bush, but that was all. They taught me to find my way back and continually gave me the opportunity to stretch my horizons.

Other group members put forward views suggesting continuous involvement in life as we age. The leading proponent, in one group, of the innate view related to agelessness characteristics modified her view as the discussion progressed, into “...what it is we don’t really know”. Eventually, in both groups, it was agreed by most members that an incident or event could be the basis for change, though as one respondent stated, “this may not be conscious”.

It was noticeable that the older members made the most contributions in the discussion of this question. It may be that they felt the most qualified to answer, and perhaps the younger members bowed to perceived experience by virtue of the emphatic presentation of the answers by older members of both groups. Personal experience and anecdotes related to these experiences were noticeable in both groups.

Interestingly, no specific personal critical life event was mentioned in either group as a basis for attaining characteristics of lived agelessness.

An emphasis on specific context was related to both the local and societal context for specific events. The local contexts for specific events were the family, workplace and social situation. Regarding societal context for specific events, the circumstances of social conditions, for instance being born into a particular socio-economic situation, were viewed as influential. The influence of the political and economic characteristics of the wider society was reflected in the discussion on opportunity.

Internal consistency was high in terms of the criteria outlined by Krueger (1998b). As discussions in this section reveal, there was an increased frequency, extensiveness and intensity compared to Topic 3, despite both seeking reasons related to attaining agelessness characteristics. Perhaps the more specific Topic 4 question enabled group members to better focus on a rationale, or the contextual examples given by group members stimulated further discussion.

#### **Topic 5** The connections between agelessness and social wellbeing

(Linked to Research Question six)

Question: 5.1 Do you think that the characteristics of agelessness we've discussed affect the way that the agelessness person you thought of lives?

*(Probe: Can you give me an example? For example the quality of their life, their lifestyle or happiness generally?)*

5.2 Then discuss... Do you think that there are stereotypes of certain ages?

*(Probe: Which ones come to mind? Which ones come to mind about how people act or behave?)*

5.3 What effect do these stereotypes of age have on the way people live their lives?

5.4 How does health come into this?

*(Probe: What sort of health? Can you give an example?)*

Topic 5 discussed how agelessness characteristics affect the way that the agelessness person each participant thought of lives. The topic also included identifying stereotypes of certain ages and the effect these stereotypes of age have on the way people live their lives, including the influence of health. Responses from both groups were lively and energetic and discussed characteristics linked to perceived agelessness in detail, with emphasis on contextual examples linked to life situations.

The effect of agelessness characteristics on the way we live relating to differing cultures was particularly emphasised. Amongst the differences discussed in both groups was the perception that in some societies there was a limitation placed upon individuals due to belief systems about age operating in those societies. For example, one group discussed the respect elders are given by virtue of age in Aboriginal culture as a limitation, with one respondent regarding this context as "...actually ageing for a purpose".

A Western societal view towards ageing was also considered. Enthusiastic discussion relating to influences on individuals who have a negatively stereotypical view of age led to a discussion of how the ageing process was viewed by Australian society. The way that transition age limits control many aspects of society in an often negative manner was also discussed in both groups. This included appropriate ages for having children and acceptance limits for studying at university for older students, with increasingly higher ages for both often viewed in a negative manner by many in society, according to the focus groups.

The influential role of the media in creating and perpetuating images for different ages was discussed in both groups. That this image in respect to age was "patronising and insulting" was suggested. One member related that:

...in the media all the time you know when anybody does something they have to put the age when it's an older person, and very often when it's a younger person they don't bother, but they've got to say it particularly if it's something a bit negative.

Overall, the media, as an important influence in society, was felt to often portray individuals' chronological age in a negatively stereotypical manner. However, apart from the influence of the media, both groups referred to a perception of societal representation of age in a similar manner. In one group, an example given as a potentially negative stereotypical label related to the concept of age and menopause in women. This stereotypical view was described as, "...a woman is no longer a woman, once you're menopausal, bang you've aged". Similarly, a stereotypical approach was emphasised in both groups to lack of computer understanding for older people.

However, there was substantial agreement in both groups that individuals within this society can choose their lifestyle in response to their own ageing process. As one participant related, "At the present the opportunities are so great!" While individuals were considered by both groups to have a choice over a situated style of personal ageing, significant others could be influential in negatively affecting choices.

Contact with people having stereotypical beliefs of ageing was felt to be limiting and restrictive. One group member gave the example of a recent experience where she clearly resisted the advance made, when she commented:

Recently I was at a dinner party in a home, we were all about the same age, and our host said, "Now I want to ask you all what plans are you making for the future. Do you think we should all go and put our names down at the Mansion or Harmony Retreat [pseudonyms for local aged residential facilities]?" Look I got indigestion. I couldn't eat a damn thing, and I thought, "My God I'm out of here". So that was fear and here they were fearing. Well, you're a long time looking at the lid aren't you? So fear motivates me to be different.

The expectations of older significant others toward younger people was also discussed, particularly in respect of family members having beliefs of what should be achieved in life by certain ages. One group member emphasised:

Something my father said to me – and he's thankfully stopped doing it now, because he didn't get a very good reception and nothing has changed anyway



– but he said a few years ago to me that by my age [thirty eight] I should at least own a block of land and should at least have some superannuation. I should have all those security things in place at this point for my old age I guess. I found that quite limiting.

This anecdote, while referring to the expectations of another, also indicates a belief in individual choice, in resisting the strong expectations inherent in the statement made. However, high self-esteem was suggested as being necessary in opposing others' views. A group's youngest member related the importance of perceived experience when stating that, "...it depends upon how much success you had at school or in your life. You build up a confidence that allows you to keep trying new things". Self esteem and confidence were referred to in both groups as assisting the creation of an openness of dialogue to assist understanding, and strongly emphasised as "keys to agelessness".

Similar discussions occurred in both groups in viewing the connection between the demonstration of agelessness characteristics and aspects of social wellbeing. Concepts that were notable and strongly supported in both groups included the importance of health and its effect on lifestyle and agelessness. The oldest member of one group related "You can't do anything if you're not well enough". The influence of health as an aspect of social wellbeing was stressed. In particular, there was emphasis on the crucial role that emotional states can have in relation to happiness and unhappiness.

Both groups emphasised happiness as an important aspect of social wellbeing. Attitudinal tendencies towards negative states of mind throughout life, and particularly in terms of depression, were viewed as being in a "stereotypical slot" and restrictive to a choice of living responsive to agelessness characteristics (viewed in both focus groups as a positive way of living). The apparent negative characteristics of loneliness and depression can "...create a sense of separation between oneself and what one mistakenly perceives as everyone else... a loss of connection", as stated by one group member. Whereas the influence of being "a contented person" was described as assisting positive physical health, with mental processes perceived as influencing the physical.

A variety of specific contexts for the developed concepts were mentioned. These included the areas of local context for specific events and societal context for specific events. In local context for specific events the influence of family and significant others on demonstrating agelessness characteristics was noted. In addition, confidence from early experiences was regarded as assisting in making choices. Overall, the choice of demonstration of agelessness characteristics specified was regarded as being within the individual's locus of control in general everyday lifestyle contexts.

In the area of societal context for specific events, social influences on belief about ageing were referred to as being significant. However, personal choice in response to one's own ageing process was still regarded as crucial. In discussing the societal context for specific events, the participants maintained that socially enacted belief systems within a social location were influential on the choices possible. In effect, the extent of the individual's locus of control was regarded as having considerable influence over the way ageing was perceived and lived. Again this emphasised that agelessness characteristics were perceived as being mainly demonstrated by a mental approach, rather than in a physical manner. Consequently, taking a positive approach was felt to affect happiness and was thought by the groups to reduce unhappiness and depression.

An example was given of a party, a community setting within the local context for specific events, where a group member felt that fear of conforming to the supposed norm in regard to ageing influenced an affirmative life change for her. The example demonstrated the catalytic effect of a critical event, as noted in the participant's response to her own ageing process.

Overall, there was substantial agreement between the two groups on the positive influences of perceived agelessness characteristics related to the choice of lifestyle contexts. In particular, there was intense discussion about the importance of choice of attitudinal characteristics in living a positive lifestyle.

The role of the media in portraying individuals' chronological age in a negatively stereotypical manner was commented upon strongly, and was viewed as a reflection on how the ageing process was viewed by society. There was a strong general

agreement amongst participants that agelessness characteristics are mainly demonstrated in a mental, not physical manner. As was stated in one group, “You can still have agelessness, even though you’ve got everything stacked against you. It still depends on attitude and personality and all sorts of things”.

**TOPIC 6** Lifelong learning and its link to change (Linked to Research Question two)

Question: A key theme from the results of the exploratory study was the capacity to respond to change. Let’s talk about lifelong learning and its link to change.

6.1 Let’s think about lifelong learning. What’s lifelong?

6.2 What’s learning?

6.3 What is your understanding of lifelong learning?

*(Probe: Can you think of any examples of lifelong learning? What about times you weren’t on a course? Can learning be informal?)*

6.4 Where does lifelong learning happen?

6.5 How does the way we respond to change affect lifelong learning?

*(Probe: Can you think of reasons for this?)*

Lifelong learning was defined by the groups as being learning throughout life.

Discussion on lifelong learning was spirited and mainly focused on lifelong learning as informal, with openness to multi-dimensional influences regarded as an important aspect of learning. However, some brief mention of formal learning was made in each group. Characteristics discussed as beneficial to lifelong learning included aspects of attitude such as the desire to learn, curiosity, self-challenge and interest. Reflective skills in continuing to learn about oneself were noted. Learning from communicative connection to those around you was vigorously supported by both groups and could be viewed within the context of being part of a learning community. Fear of the unknown in response to change was initially discussed, though the unknown eventually was viewed, dependent on attitude taken, as being a positive and “radical step into learning”.

The groups regarded experience rather than age as being influential on learning. Informal learning through a personal choice of focus was emphasised strongly. It was suggested that in a changing society, irrespective of age, learning was not an option. One comment was, “Who are not the lifelong learners?” The importance of having a self-perception that age was not limiting was demonstrated in the stated view that, “You’re a learner first and then your age comes second”. A potential influence on choice of formal learning was related as the effect of life transitions, for example, due to commitments to children or career, and family commitments prior to retirement. Several potential influences upon learning were discussed. Fear in not wanting to become a burden was suggested as an age-related motivation to learn.

The groups agreed that lifelong learning was for the whole length of your life. Learning was seen to include a wide range of learning processes as well as the product of the learning. One respondent defined lifelong learning as, “An attitude that you’re always open to learn something new, to build on yourself, whether you’re ninety three or whatever”. Curiosity or “wanting to know” in particular elicited a variety of comments. One representative comment was:

You want to go to the next stage and learn a little bit more, to find out what your answer is, and that leads to another thing and on and on it goes. So curiosity is a good pull I reckon.

The independence of being open to learning was emphasised by one respondent:

Learning is anything and everything. Informally, it is something you just learn. You hear something and you think, “Oh that’s interesting,” and it goes on all the time, if you’re receptive and if you’ve got this enquiring mind and if it’s important to you.

Personal characteristics that relate to lifelong learning were referred to in a number of ways. Characteristics discussed included curiosity, self-challenge and interest. Reflective skills in continuing to learn about yourself were commented upon by respondents in both groups, with an aspect of social wellbeing in “attempting to understand our experiences” being regarded as crucial across both groups. One

member related that a critical incident could occur, “having moments of wisdom that literally deepen you and you’re not going to forget them”.

A further aspect of personal learning was mentioned as being the “...physical side of things, learning how to use your body properly to get the most out of it”. Little support was given, however, to this view, and the overall emphasis was on lifelong learning being “in your head” as one person concisely put it.

Communication was a further area identified as salient. Mention was especially made of emotional communication, and of the difficulties of connecting with others. Considerable comment was made regarding the importance of communication and questioning in our capacity to learn throughout life. The need to not be restricted in vocabulary, in relation to communication with people of different ages, was forcefully advocated in one group.

Informal learning was discussed as being more important than formal learning, with examples given regarding personal experiences. Formal learning was suggested as completing courses at educational institutions. Learning both informally and formally, on a “big picture” scale with the learning society “as a nation”, was suggested. The different dimensions of an informal learning situation were illustrated by the following example:

I recently joined the Ramblers, a walking club, as I thought this would be really good for physical exercise. On the way to where we were going to the mountain we were going to attack, I was in a car with three other people. I learnt all about the Czechoslovakian mountains, and the walk and how much it cost. The person behind me in the backseat had also talked all about going to India and going through the mountains there. The people I walked with included a young lady who was a genetic scientist and she’d recently started her own Internet business. She was telling me about this whole network of people in government she was working through. I spoke to two people who were librarians about books, as we were walking. There were about 20 people on the walk and people sort of take you into their conversations and you’re drifting between these groups. So what I actually did was go for physical

exercise, but you know, there is this incredible worldwide wealth of knowledge coming in. I thought I only joined it to walk, but look at the places I've visited today! So I take that very much as informal learning.

This example not only relates the range of potential learning inherent in an informal situation, but also implies the necessity to be involved and open to the possibilities of learning from informal exchanges. In one group, limitations to learning was discussed briefly, with the eldest group member's hearing difficulties related by her as detrimental to her learning. A further aspect mentioned was limitations in mobility for older people.

As a key theme from the results of the exploratory study was the capacity to respond to change, the groups were asked the question, "How does the way we respond to change affect lifelong learning?" Initially both groups energetically discussed response to change as being one of fear of the unknown. Observations on this aspect were consistent across age ranges in the groups, with a number of people commenting on this view. Comments included, "a basic fear of big changes", "change is always difficult", "a change is a threat", "a basic innate feeling of insecurity", and "it's a human response to dislike change".

Despite this initially pessimistic perception of how change could be regarded, the response to change was viewed differently by a majority of the group. A supported view in one group was that of drawing on personal resources, "...maybe it gets easier with age if you stop and kind of take stock and think, "Oh, I've been through this before". Further emphasis was placed on the optimistic approaches to change that enable positive outcomes in learning in life to occur, with examples given of the need to adapt constructively to modern technology such as ATMs and computers. One respondent illustrated how a critical life event could provide the impetus for positive change from an originally perceived negative situation, when she related:

I find change is probably critical in agelessness and lifelong learning. We had a business that completely foundered. We had to sell the house and just sort of settle things so that we didn't leave any debts, but it was really horrific at that point. I'll never forget it. I thought I could never sell this magnificent house

you know and all the paddocks and everything, to say goodbye would be impossible. But on the last day I woke up and felt so excited about the rest of my life! To that point I thought they'd have to take me away in a strait jacket, truly, I just loved the place to death. I found out I could move to Woodford and start a Fine Arts course. It was so exciting. There was nothing stopping me, whereas I could have spent the rest of my life in that town, in that house, and just sort of working in a little shop and just not being able to develop. But from then on change, in my case, became a radical step into learning. The fact was that it was so clear-cut, that I was free, yet at the time you didn't feel that as you were approaching it. The development has been brilliant but that learning thing wouldn't have happened without the change.

The predominant local context for specific events for this topic was through informal learning contexts of leisure hobbies and interests, and included a range of contexts for learning such as personal interactive contexts, socio-cultural contexts and social wellbeing contexts. The local context for specific events for perceptions of freedom to make choices from change was related to social wellbeing areas of economic circumstances and emotional states.

**TOPIC 7** The relationship between age and lifelong learning (Linked to Research Question six and seven)

Question 7.1 So how does age relate to lifelong learning?

*(Probes: Is there any link between them? In what way? Can you give any examples?)*

The notion that it was life experience rather than age that had the greatest influence on lifelong learning was strongly expressed by the groups. As one group member expressed, "Experience might allow you to refine the choices you make about what you learn". Both groups agreed that learning was non-chronological and dependent on the learning choices made related to experiences of life.

Life transitions were thought by one group to potentially affect learning. Both groups related the necessity of completion of particular family obligations, such as children reaching a particular stage in education, in having the choice to focus on formal

learning. In this regard, while age was not limiting the choice, formal study was followed for one group member after the transition of retirement:

It's a matter of timing. Until I retired I was so busy rearing a family, pursuing a career, and there wasn't time for anything else, because you were flat out doing so many things. Then there is this incredible luxury of having the time to choose what am I going to do with the rest of my life. Some people are threatened by that, and they are very fearful of it, but to me I thought, "Whacko here we go", and it's become an enormous adventure.

While life transitions could affect the timing of formal learning for some, the choice to learn being unrelated to age was again raised as a crucial element of lifelong learning, with informal learning emphasised. The statement, "it's up to you to learn or not to learn. It's your choice I think" was representative of the discussions in both groups.

In respect to the lack of influence of age on learning, several key areas were commented upon. Apart from renewed focus on learning in a formal sense after transitional events, the need for informal everyday learning in a changing society irrespective of age was supported, with some learning being considered essential for living. As one person said, "I'm just wondering who are not the lifelong learners".

Increasing age was suggested as being a possible motivation in choosing to learn. One respondent stated that:

I think there are some people who set out to learn in a way that is directly related to their age in the sense that they don't want to be a burden on anybody. They have that attitude that if you don't use it you lose it, so they set out to learn. I guess you could say it's for the wrong reasons but in a sense, they can see the fear coming in. They can see they are getting to a certain point in their lives and if they just stagnate, they might become a burden on society or their family or whatever. They set out to keep their brain active for that reason, so maybe sometimes it is directly related to their age.



Fear as motivation was one suggested impetus for learning. Another was in the modelling of the way an older person might approach life and learning, “for old people to show other old people that they can, I mean the message is one of inspiration, isn’t it”.

Individual participants’ perceptions of their reason for learning were discussed. In discussing the self-labelling process that can influence our choices relating to learning and our own ageing process, one participant commented:

I think age comes in that you don’t define your learning by your age, like you don’t define yourselves by your age. Like you’re a learner first and then your age comes second, whereas other people put their age first and then learning comes second or even further down the track, but it depends on how self aware you are and how you define yourself and whether age is something that you define yourself by.

Contexts for this topic related to local context for specific events in the learning/education context, with both formal study after retirement and informal learning throughout life contexts being involved, as well as elements of general everyday lifestyle contexts.

#### **4.3.4 Summary of results**

In Phase One, sub-groupings of characteristics associated with the concept of agelessness from the survey led to five TAGs. These were change, involvement, affirmative mindset, attitudes to age and physical appearance. The first four categories were more frequently mentioned however, with physical appearance mentioned less often.

Phase Two of the study confirmed many of the characteristic categories and the TAGs derived from Phase One. However, some were more strongly confirmed than others, as discussed. While no new characteristics arose at this stage, several important concepts related to development of characteristics were discussed and built upon.

In Phase Two the groups rejected the view that in perceptions of age, what you see is what you get, that physical perceptions of age were essential to being perceived to demonstrate agelessness characteristics. An emphasis throughout the responses was on the importance of a mental attitudinal approach to agelessness.

While the participants extended, refined and endorsed characteristics of agelessness initially formulated in Phase One categories and TAGs, the characteristics were not always clearly related to situated contexts. Often contextual aspects were not mentioned and it appeared that there was a conviction that once the characteristic was developed or attained, it was applicable to that person, irrespective of context. In this study, this situated-style concept is referred to as an 'identity template' and seemed to be inherent in many of the expressed views.

The groups avowed that learning choices are made in relation to openness to experiences of life. The importance of informal learning was emphasised, as well as the necessity to continue learning for the whole of a life. Concepts of maturity, aspects of social wellbeing, environmental influences, and positive modelling influences were attributed to someone demonstrating agelessness characteristics. Critical life events were also viewed as influential in relation to derivation of agelessness characteristics.

In consequence, a number of additional areas of interest arose from the focus groups for exploration within the Phase Three case studies. Further understanding of agelessness in relation to stereotypical viewing of different generations, positive modelling aspects of people demonstrating agelessness characteristics, the role of maturity, and perceptions of the importance of individual locus of control were sought in Phase Three. Furthermore, in Phase Three the response to specific events, particularly critical life events, was considered in terms of epiphanies or turning points, in relation to agelessness in lives lived.

While agelessness characteristics predominated the discussion, a discussion of non-agelessness at different ages, including younger ages, was commented upon. The groups reflected areas of non-agelessness as being related to fixed attitudes demonstrated in lifestyles through stereotypical dress and by conformity to

stereotypical cultural images of age, with one image of the visual imagery of non-involvement "...like living in a cloud of candy floss, pink, soft".

As a result of the analysis of focus group interviews by a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1998), and incorporating focus group analysis (Krueger 1998b), an intensive biographical case study approach utilising in-depth interviews with narrative analysis was designed for use in Phase Three to further develop understanding of emergent and changing themes arising in the study, particularly in relation to the influence of key variables on lives lived.

## **Chapter Five: Phase Three case studies**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter Five presents the analysis of each of the interviews. Analysis was made using narrative analysis techniques consistent with Polkinghorne (1995 in Hatch and Wisniewski 1995), Seidman (1998), Munro (1998), Barone (2001), and Denzin (2001). It was intended that the biographies emerging from the interviews would relate in depth the subjects' lives up to the present, their present lives and also reflections on the past, present and future, incorporating focuses on agelessness, lifelong learning, and on aspects of social wellbeing. Following the three case studies, a cross-case analysis discusses issues and ongoing emergent themes from the three sets of interviews in this phase, and incorporates literature relating to the analysis. The researcher's reflection of the research process, 'Mapping my own journey', follows.

### **5.2 Case Study One: Auntie**

#### **Auntie's journey: "It's a long road you walk along"**

I'd like to wash clothes in the trough, you know, wring them out and peg them on the line. That was our way. Not washing machines. I'd like to go camping. Watch the kangaroos come out at night. I can't do it now. I've got a machine that side and that side, and an emergency button that side. I'd look fine wouldn't I? I'd be a real trumped up modern Aboriginal, I think I would call myself.

Throughout her story, Auntie stands out as a life that has been unrestricted by chronological age while encompassing, and adapting to, radically differing life circumstances. Changes occur between an ethno-cultural childhood background, which in her view is consistent with the traditions of the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, and an adult Australian city life. Auntie never attended high school, and left primary school at 13 after a childhood in a natural setting on a small island designated as an Aboriginal

reserve, and yet eventually she earned widespread general respect leading to an honorary university degree while in her seventies. I wondered what was the pathway from a start to life in a small community on an isolated island, as part of an Aboriginal community that the state government denied as existing, to the public recognition denoted by the bestowing of a high academic award.

On being asked what agelessness meant to her, Auntie used the metaphor of a road as she replied spontaneously that “It’s a long road you walk along, you know you never get old. You’re never going to get old. You’re never going to feel old. That’s what I feel like. I’m not going to feel old”. Auntie’s view of age, agelessness, and learning emerges through her narrative. Experiences of life, and in particular the influences of her life’s epiphanies, impact on the development of her identity. Auntie’s narrative focuses on events, particularly epiphanous events, their situated contexts and her responses to the occurrences. Perceived effects on her, both in the short term and in a longer perspective of her life, are discussed through demonstrated personality characteristics.

Our interviews were held in Auntie’s house, minimally furnished though comfortable, but showing few souvenirs of the experiences of her life. Auntie’s calmness and quiet energy pervaded our discussions, her voice rose only as she made an emphatic point about one of the topics she felt so strongly about. Her complexion is fresh and natural, though she admits to using face cream to “stop the dry rot from setting in”. Her belief in being authentic in life extends to the physical appearance of not colouring her hair: “I don’t put dye in my hair because it’s going grey. I want it to go grey”. This, I think, represents Auntie’s attitude towards her belief in living life genuinely and not being concerned about the judgement of others relating to this physical sign often equated with age.

Auntie’s story starts with powerful and poetic memories of her childhood. This is not surprising, as some of these experiences she describes as being catalysts for actions in the rest of her life. Initially I interpreted her story more literally, as one of overcoming modest beginnings leading eventually to winning respect from the non-Aboriginal community for her contributions to the Aboriginal community. I have been inspired by

her struggle to overcome what I view as adversity. Her narrative confronts her hard times and incorporates learning from her experiences of life, through the filter of her positive view of life. The way she views herself in terms of characteristics such as determination, the need to be involved, and a continuing passion for life has assisted her to respond positively to life events in different life contexts and settings.

Her humble and unemotional descriptions of her involvement in assisting her Tasmanian Aboriginal community to value and develop identity, through assisting young people and being a prominent member of Aboriginal policy-making groups, as discussed later, are an illustration of her constructive attitude towards life circumstances that were often hostile to racial matters. Her open and positive attitude in this element of her life is in stark contrast to the negativity of enforced segregationist policies. Furthermore, a symbolic example of difference could be inferred from her experience of being treated as a scientific curiosity in a study by an anthropologist on the island's inhabitants during her childhood. She describes the personal and communal indignities of having physiological features examined.

### **Epiphanies: “You’ve known all your life what you are”**

A number of epiphanies (Denzin 2001), indicating impactful transitional life elements, have had a significant effect on Auntie's life. The epiphanies I have identified are mentioned in general order of the importance Auntie placed on the particular events and depth and feeling of discussion in our conversations. The epiphanies referred to are discussed later within the context of the narrative. In her childhood she emphasises two turning point moments, which I view as affecting her lifelong involvement with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Firstly, a major epiphany was the visit for scientific purposes by an anthropologist to her home on Cape Barren Island, where he conducted racially-based physiological examinations on Auntie and other islanders. Also at this stage of her childhood, a second epiphany can be identified in her visits to Aboriginal ‘old people’ (her term). This cumulative epiphany was influential in her later responses to age and development of characteristics related to agelessness. Further important epiphanies emerging in Auntie's childhood were a third one relating to a classroom

incident involving a poem, that influenced her attitude to learning, and fourthly, a major epiphany, her mother's response to specific instances of misfortune at the time of a polio epidemic, strengthening Auntie's resolve to act in a positive, affective and giving manner in her life interactions with others.

Auntie discusses an event later in her life, which to me becomes evident as a further epiphany, when she was asked – and chose – to foster Aboriginal Wards of the State children. Another occurrence that I view as an epiphany was her son's athletic running achievement above the potential she perceived in him, and the consequential effect on her expectations of people in her life. Similarly, a seventh epiphany is identified by me as the major stroke endured eight years ago that has strongly contributed to the way her life is lived now.

### **Childhood context: "The open road to happiness"**

Auntie's story began with descriptions of her childhood spent on Cape Barren Island, a small island utilised as an Aboriginal Reserve from 1912 to 1951. In contradiction to its existence, the Tasmanian government decreed that there weren't any surviving Aborigines at that time (Ryan 1996). In the government's view Truganinni, the last Aborigine, died in 1876, creating the paradox of a government establishing an Aboriginal Reserve when simultaneously promulgating the view that no Aborigines were held to be living. Ryan (1996, p.3) refers to this as, "The myth of extermination". Auntie has contended with this myth throughout her life in being labelled as Aboriginal, while simultaneously having her existence and heritage as an Aborigine denied.

There is an interesting interplay between Auntie's memories and official reports of Cape Barren Island. While describing the same place, they present different perspectives. Furthermore, her historical descriptions evoked in me, a white person, a mixture of emotions from anger and sadness at the way the Aboriginal people were often treated, to a sense of wonderment at the warmth of human spirit displayed in the events and environment described by Auntie.

She commenced her account of her own life by describing recollections of a 1930s childhood within a community separated from many everyday characteristics of the outside world. Throughout the interviews, the lived experiences of what she viewed as the rich and diverse life style of her childhood were regarded as positive lessons to be utilised as the basis for negotiating changes and later events in her life.

To find in her narrative the constant reference to a lost but seemingly idyllic existence was not my expectation. Even if I took account of the beneficial views of past memories, in essence a mythologising of childhood experiences, there still remained to me a composite of the affirmative verbal pictures Auntie gave of her life on the island. Common beliefs in values such as compassion, togetherness, and sharing seemed to predominate in her descriptions of life, over the difficulties of a likely frugal existence from the described scarcity of material benefits and the narrow range of foods.

Auntie's admiration for the life style of her childhood is evident. She pronounced that it was "...wonderful the way we lived". The pattern of a childhood that owed little to distractions from outside the island, and was portrayed by her as demonstrating a simplicity and connectedness between the inhabitants and the natural world of life on an exposed Bass Strait island, was described by Auntie in autobiographical writings in these glowing terms:

We lived on an island of peace without fear of the outside world coming in and turning our lives around in those days. In the midst of the mainland turbulence, this little island shone upon the waters of Bass Strait like an oasis in the desert. We only had to look at Cape Barren to see the open road to happiness ... In our minds were a feeling of admiration for the moon, the stars, the sea and flight of birds, for the glow of flowers, and the sound of wind as it passed through the trees, waves gently lapping the rocks.



This description inspires me as a mythic or symbolic representation of a way of life in tune with natural elements, which Auntie views as traditional. Again she utilises the metaphor of a road, this time in envisioning the island of her childhood.

This view was also surprising to me, as Auntie paints a picture of the Cape Barren Island Reserve that is in contrast to the Western world's reconstruction of the Tasmanian indigenous settlement history. This is often viewed as one more step in a dark and tragic history of Tasmanian Aboriginal people that had begun with European colonisation of Tasmania, or as it was originally known, Van Diemens Land. The killing by intent or imported disease of so many of the Aboriginal population of Tasmania was so severe that a people, who it is thought inhabited in isolation for 10,000 years, was reduced from 50,000-7000 in less than a hundred years (Reynolds 1995). This was followed by a fateful move to Wybelenna on Flinders Island in 1835 (Ryan 1996), and further degradation and loss of life for the native people.

Furthermore, her autobiographical writings describe how the seal traders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries affected survival, after initial trading cooperation descended into dishonourable actions as the sealers, "...raided the clans, abducted women and killed the men who tried to protect them". From the Aboriginal women who comprised part of the sealing community, mutton birding, in Auntie's view a more traditional Aboriginal custom, was developed, thereby superseding sealing as seal numbers diminished.

Auntie described to me the continuation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture as demonstrated by island life at the time of her childhood in the 1930s, without malice or regret for what had occurred to her ancestors. She recalled her lifestyle being simple, perhaps strongly affected by the economic position of her family and the community generally. An income of five shillings per week, half of the amount given to white families at the time, sufficed for essentials, while the staple foods were obtained from the island. Nevertheless, she recalled leisure pursuits such as sports days, dances, horse races

and even blindfold races with the participants losing a sense of direction and crashing into physical obstacles such as bushes, trees and spectators.

Auntie negotiated her identity through her experiences as part of the Aboriginal community on the island. Despite financial limitations, the sense of togetherness amongst the inhabitants was marked. Throughout our interviews Auntie referred to the community life on Cape Barren Island in positive terms. Epiphanies such as the visit of the anthropologist, despite its negative impact, also brought a sense of being different together. Her mother's response to the adversity of community polio illness and the visits to the old people of the community are occurrences Auntie brought to mind that also involve a sense of community. Other instances, such as the careful preparations for the social events discussed, were community happenings that allowed the expression of feelings of specialness through difference, as well as of mutual respect. She told me that the experiences of her childhood inculcated a sense of identity with other Tasmanian Aboriginal people, "We knew who we were. I think the pride ...was instilled in us".

Ryan (1996) refers to observations made on government-initiated visits, in contrast to the sense of community Auntie describes, consistently noting what was judged to be a basic level of physical living conditions. Included was Burbury's (1929 as cited in Ryan 1996, p.245) assertions that:

How they live is a mystery...In the settlement there are about twenty-four dwellings, more than half mere shacks of two rooms: some contain four rooms and about as many three rooms. Into these are crowded 200-250 men, women and children...they have an inferiority complex deeply ingrained, and they hate whites, regarding themselves as having been supplanted and exploited by white men.

The description would be judged as being far from idyllic in some people's terms of living conditions. However, for Auntie, her view of traditional practices of the island was

developed through the process of community life and her identification with the life practices involved in this environment during her childhood.

Auntie's descriptions of the warmth of human interactions and communal sharing within the Tasmanian Aboriginal group emphasises a different perspective of life from Burbury's described starkness of living conditions. Her emphasis on affective elements of the lifestyle is meaningful to her in contradiction to the analytical government account.

A major turning point in her childhood on the island, one that led her to a lifelong striving for public recognition of a Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, was being one of the subjects of a scientific study by an anthropologist. The decisive experience, which Auntie regarded as degrading, occurred both during the field work and through categorised photographs in the report. She described to me her personal recollections of the human characteristics of some of the individuals, not evident in the sombre two-dimensional black and white 'mug shots' taken for the study.

She discussed her sense of resentment and disgust at the indignities of the study and what the study represented. Her anger is apparent from the humiliation of those times so clearly remembered. As she recounted in her autobiographical writings:

I can remember as a young teenager getting undressed and standing in line with boys while the scientists examined us. I was very embarrassed. We were taught never to expose our bodies to the opposite sex. Even when we went swimming we had to keep our bodies covered with a top. I was well developed at 13 years old. I cried all the time, I wasn't the only one who had their head measured, looked up nose, in ears, structure of cheek bone, hair, fingers, toes recorded. Did we have four fingers and one thumb on hands, toes on our feet?

The symbolism of this mistreatment is reflected through her intuitive understanding, evident to me from graphic images evoked by her description of the recalled events. She gave two examples, the first being the government approved Tindale study, where she

further emphasised to me her feelings of being looked down upon, and the slights of caste labelling from the experience. "I thought someday we gotta get up here, you know. I just thought, yes we can get to the top you know, we can make something of ourselves". The second example occurred when politicians arrived from the Tasmanian mainland at voting time and threw boiled unwrapped lollies in the dirt for the children to squabble over. She told me that she never scrambled for them. These actions can be viewed symbolically as representative of a governing system's views of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Her recall of what she believes are the most crucial and influential experiences of the time led her to develop underlying tenets of a personal belief system. A tenet is regarded in this study as the underlying basis for a belief system. This system was not based upon a ferment of hate and bitterness, which might have been the result of such confronting experiences, but upon the softer rebellion of development of directed personal and human values. In some people the experiences of racial segregation from the rest of Tasmania might have created negative responses to the inferred, and often explicit, messages being promoted in incidents such as those described. Residual attitudes of fear, anger and even self-destructive behaviour, with accompanying feelings of low self-worth, could have been a long-term manifestation of the low expectations of teachers and public figures, and other social messages given. However, for Auntie, her time on the island was crucial and influential in leading her to develop a range of personal beliefs. These beliefs accentuated the development of values, developed despite, and perhaps because of, the confronting experiences she faced.

Her mother influenced this development by modelling actions in assisting others throughout her childhood. Auntie believes that her recall of her mother's actions was influential upon her own actions. This impacted most strongly at the time of what I see as a major epiphany, relating to a polio epidemic on the island. A repeated theme of Auntie's life is her displayed determination, and she admired this demonstrated quality in her mother in response to the crisis. Auntie explained that her mother's involvement as midwife in the community necessitated one room of their small crowded house (Auntie is

one of twelve children, with ten initially surviving from infancy) being kept for birthing. At the time of the polio epidemic her mother's method of looking after those suffering was particularly memorable for Auntie. Despite her father's admonitions of "What about your own children, they'll get it", her mother continued to help. Auntie recalled this with pride in her voice. "Nothing could stop her from doing things you know, she was so determined".

Auntie's strong attachment to her mother and her mother's reaction to this experience of adversity during Auntie's childhood was transformational in responses to difficult times in her own life. Auntie's mother influentially modelled characteristics such as giving, of her time, materially with food, or caring through using her nursing skills to look after others as well as through mid-wifely practice. Also, determination was evident in recalled events, and prominent in her declared perception of her mother. Auntie discussed with me her love for her mother and her admiration for her mother's value system. She explained that although her mother could be gruff at times, she "...had wonderful values... I learnt, that I don't take things from people that someone else could do with. I'd give people my last penny I've got in my purse... I can't see people go without". Her affinity with her mother's value-system was further emphasised as she mused, "...maybe I'm just a replica of my mother... we looked very much alike they say, so I think maybe Mum is being reincarnated in me".

An epiphany experienced by Auntie related to the interactional occurrences with the old people of the community. Denzin (2001, p.145) refers to cumulative epiphanies as, "...reactions to events that have been going on for a long period of time". She recalled that she was the only child who shared time consistently with them. She was fascinated by the people and their stories and would, she said, sit and listen without interruption. These stories would often last past dark and result in her being walked home by complaining older children of the house she had been visiting. She declared to me a love of the "...way they [the old people] spoke, their lingo that they used", and how she felt important just being there while other children were out playing. Her representation of the atmosphere of those listening times was evocative as she confided that:

I'd have to go and watch Uncle Clarence and Aunt Fanny talking. I'd have to go round to Athie and Florry's, listen to them arguing, I'd have to go up to Auntie Kilma's where she'd be going, "tut, tut, tut" and smoking the old pipe. You know things like that fascinate me.

Auntie's identity was influenced by these interactions. As she concisely said, of the old people, "They were our professors". Perhaps at the time there was a growing feeling of specialness at being a Tasmanian Aborigine. The seeds of a potential influence on future events in her life were sown. She maintained that, "...you know who you are here, you don't have to get up on a soapbox and sing out and scream, look I'm Aboriginal, because you've known all your life what you are".

By her maintaining, "You know what you are" Auntie expresses the clarity of understanding of her identity. Living in a community during her childhood where people identified as Tasmanian Aborigines clearly assisted her in creating and establishing her identity as part of that community. There is no resistance demonstrated to the establishment of this identity, just an acceptance and, I feel, a sense of pride in her assertion that, "You've known all your life what you are".

Her future actions, focused on assisting Tasmanian Aboriginal people in need, had their origins in the grounding of Aboriginal identity in the times spent visiting the older members of the community. She confirmed her view of the linkage between her Aboriginal identity and the influence of the old people, when she reflected that, "Maybe from them I got what I am today... I think from those old people I think I learned a lot and I think its been installed in me and its been there all these years".

### **Moving on: Adult life on the mainland of Tasmania: Joining the "Boogiemans"**

On the island, the segregated nature of her childhood was reinforced by the adults in the community. Auntie told me the reason given for not being freely able to leave the island

was to avoid encountering the “Boogiemans”, portrayed as mythological cannibalistic figures. Eventually though, in her mid-teens, she did leave the island after the state government, in keeping with the policy of assimilation, encouraged the islanders to leave and to enter the general Tasmanian community in the hope of improving their economic situation and providing job opportunities for the young.

A dominant theme of life emerged when I asked her to imagine seeing her life as chapters and relating what they would be. She thought for an instant then replied that, “...the moments that stand out most are the moments that I’ve helped other people”. Her self-conceptualised role as a change-agent, bringing about change through helping others, particularly from a continuing involvement in and giving of time and personal expertise to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, is a dominant theme of her life.

A different phase of Auntie’s life occurred when she left the island and was involved with occupations in the general non-Aboriginal community, and then was married and had children. Her life on the mainland of Tasmania was very different from her island beginnings. She became busy in different occupations and as mother to her children. She worked at a number of jobs, mainly factory or cleaning positions such as with a major employer in the local textile mill, where her speed and dexterity was valued to the extent that she talked proudly about earning more in bonuses than the basic wage. Also, she referred to an instance in the hospital where she worked when she asserted herself to the matron, who was regarded in such awe that Auntie’s stand was considered by her workmates to be courageous.

The new entrants from the island were exposed to racist comments in accustoming themselves to a very different lifestyle in their entry into the wider Tasmanian community. Ryan (1996, p.249) describes how “...they were often refused service in hotels and suffered discrimination in employment”. Auntie’s remarks on the racism she personally encountered, when in her first job she was told openly that she was a “black bastard”, to which she instantly replied “...well, you’re a woolly woofter aren’t you?” thereby ending the verbal abuse. She suggested she had learned that by standing up for

herself, the situation was defused. Intuitively she also recognised that a predominantly negative view of the Tasmanian Aborigines could not be changed simply.

After meeting her husband, a non-Aboriginal man, they had four children and her dislike of wasting time became more evident. Her penchant for being busy with different tasks demonstrated her strong work ethic. As she stressed to me, “You don’t leave for tomorrow what you can do today. You mustn’t do that, because you mightn’t wake up the next morning and you’ve left undone. That’s why I always try to do what I must do”.

At this time of bringing up a young family a turning point arose that, I believe, became a major epiphany, described earlier as her fifth epiphany. She was asked to foster Aboriginal Wards-of-the-State children. This she agreed to, and it was a decision that started her long involvement in assisting children in the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. She saw her role with the foster children as a teacher, helping the children with schoolwork, as well as a firm but patient foster mother. Her assistance became so well known that, as she tells the story, the police brought girls to her. The added responsibilities made for an even busier lifestyle. As she recalled:

I would just get in and do things. Look, I can remember I had three children from one family and my own four. I would work all week at the textile mill. I would work Saturday, sometimes. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays at the Hotel and Saturday I would wash and iron and cook, wash the walls and have everything prepared for next week. Each meal for each day.

Nevertheless, the challenge of bringing up her own children, as well as foster children, led to an innovative approach to child care in the creation of a state Aboriginal Childcare Centre. She helped develop the site and was Coordinator for two years, earning compliments on her personal management style and commitment, mentioned in her autobiographical writings, “Your personal approach, your wisdom and your commonsense have been like a breath of fresh air” in a letter from the Director of Student Services for the state education department. Further active participation included being



Chairperson of the state Aboriginal Education Council for six years. Again, glowing acclaim for her commitment included the Superintendent of Education Services stating, “I am sure your unselfishness and devotion will be a continuing inspiration to us all”.

In listening to Auntie’s narrative, I found embedded the concepts of sharing, caring, and giving. From the shared housework (at least among the girls) to the communal involvement on the island, and continuing throughout her family and Tasmanian Aboriginal community life, there were recurrent instances of supporting others, mainly by voluntary work. She emphasises that “It’s wonderful, it’s keeping me going. That’s what’s driving me I think, is to keep me going to help these people”.

She gave me examples of her altruism. She mentioned giving support by personal financial assistance to others, such as constantly giving away notable bingo winnings, and helping families with money for food, clothes, school uniforms and moving expenses. One incident she recalls is giving her last twenty dollars away to someone for cigarettes, despite being vehemently against smoking. But as she feels that money is to be shared, she remarked, “...money is nothing to me...I prefer to give it away”.

### **Learning: “You can’t learn enough”**

Auntie believes strongly in the importance of learning. Her state education finished at age thirteen, though she regarded herself as an excellent school student, and formal education only re-appeared in her life many years later. The learning she advocates as having the most effect upon her is, “What makes the world go round, people in it, the way they act”. Her outlook of learning most from experiences of life is primarily directed towards informal learning, such as the oral learning from the ‘professors’, the ‘old people’ mentioned earlier.

However, formal learning in primary school, on Cape Barren Island, provided an encounter that I feel was a major epiphany. A young teacher asked:

“Does anyone know the poem?” and I put my hand up, “I’m Madge”, ‘cause the teachers always called me Madge and he said, “Oh” and I said “I know it Sir”, and he said, “I bet you do”, and of course I stood up and recited it for him. He said, “You do know it”, and I said, “Of course I do, I learnt it last year”. See, and to me, I felt as though he put me down that day, because he didn’t believe that I knew... and that made me more determined I think. If people put me down, that makes me more determined that I’m going to do things and make it right.

Her forceful retelling of this story is one indication of her realisation of the value white society placed upon formal learning.

A further formal learning experience was the influence of reading in learning. Being an avid reader, her enthusiasm is attributed to access to the library at her primary school on the island. In particular she has read and researched extensively into the archives and history of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Further eclectic experiences of learning described by Auntie included informal experiences travelling and attending conferences in a range of Aboriginal committee roles.

Initially I interpreted informal learning in her life as being more influential, as the epiphanies she described were mainly not concerned with formal education. However, the poem in school and experience from school reading do indicate that there was an important role played by formal learning. Her current regard for formal learning is verified by her views on the difficulties faced by Aboriginal young people at the present time in Tasmania. Her concern is that the young people do not sufficiently participate and qualify in formal education courses.

Learning continues to be prominent in her life. Her attitude to new learning is, “Doing what comes naturally” and is a personal challenge she has met in her own individual manner. Throughout our interviews she emphasised the importance of the oral tradition in her childhood and in interactions throughout all of her life. An example explained to me was in the writing and presenting of a speech where a concentrated effort was given to

preparation, but her not being concerned about what she had written when actually presenting. She mentioned that she had little idea as to what was actually said or whether the preparation was being followed, but presented in an informal manner associated with her oral traditions.

When discussing lifelong learning overall and asking her what she believed lifelong to be, she answered, "...you're here for a certain time, aren't you. How long is that going to be?" She viewed age for her as having nothing to do with her ability to learn, and not limiting to learning in her life at present. She was clear in her response to the part learning will continue to play in her life, when she declared, "The way I am today, the way I am today. I'll still be learning, I'll still be reading. I'll still be coming up with things Paul, and writing more research".

#### **Age and agelessness: "I'm still a young old age"**

Auntie's view on age is strongly influenced by her childhood island reflections. As she told me:

...growing up on the island if a person is fifty they had to be an old person. It was almost time to die. They had to be old. Oh yes, tottery, not being able to think, not being able to do anything for themselves. They had to be fifty.

This description of island people reveals her apprehension at the possibility of infirmity and death at what she considers such a young age. Auntie discloses that she doesn't feel restricted by her chronological age in the way she lives her life. Currently, when pressed, she comments on feeling about 40 or 50 years of age, obviously not the 50 she observed on the island, but she is not conscious of age.

Her attitude towards her own age is influenced by observations of aged people who are:

...a lot younger than me and I notice that they keep repeating themselves...I went to a lady on Friday and she's, I think, she's about five or six years younger than me, and yet she looked twice the age, maybe I look at them people and think well I'm not going to be like them.

This example illustrates how she develops and refines her identity in terms of age. She distinguishes her characteristics, relating to perception of age, from her comparison of someone else's in terms of both physical and behavioural attributes. She declared:

I shouldn't have to think old, I shouldn't have to be old and I know I'm on a walking stick but I can't help that but because I'm like that and I am my age, it doesn't affect me at all. I don't look at it as being old. I'm still a young old age I think.

I think that this is not a denial of her age but an understanding that she can make choices relating to the way she lives at any age. She doesn't believe that age matters in the way life is lived, and commented to me that she thought it is possible to live to 150 years of age. Her son, when he became 60, asked whether that made her feel old and received a reply that, "...because you're 60, I don't have to be old".

She refers to inter-generational conflict of the older condemning the younger and thinks this is negatively judgmental: "I think maybe this is why I don't feel old, that I can relate to them. I don't think they look at me as though I'm old. No they don't seem to treat me as though I'm an old woman".

I wondered whether her view of age and agelessness affects her view of death. Her narrative discussed many changes and difficulties encountered and throughout these she would appear to have displayed a resilient and focused attitude towards acceptance of change. She declared that, "I don't have any changes ...I accept things".

She mentioned to me how her view of death and her feelings about life and death had evolved from experiences, often the difficult ones in her life. While being sad for the loss of loved ones she accepts that the ultimate responsibility is with the individual. Both her husband and her mother reached a moment where they wished to die, and as she relates, “Who am I to say, ‘No, don’t die yet’”. She is critical of her sister’s actions when, upon her mother’s pending death, her sister entreated her mother not to die. As Auntie graphically describes, “My sister come in and grabbed her by the arms and said, “Mum, don’t leave us!” and I thought how can you be so selfish Joan, to see Mum so tired and worn out that she doesn’t want to live. She wants rest”.

A minor epiphany is identified by me as a stroke she had eight years ago. She confided to me that in nearly dying she felt an experience of visiting both heaven and hell, and remaining in heaven until she was healed. This minor epiphany was a further influence in her views on dying. Her religious beliefs are eclectically described, with a professed Christian non-church-going conviction but also a reference to reincarnation and to premonitions. She mentioned to me the number of funerals she attended on the island during childhood, and I wondered what other influences had arisen from her Aboriginal childhood experiences of funerals. Auntie believes that her view of death, which many would consider stoic in calmly accepting her fate, is different from many people in its acceptance of knowing that we have to die and not being afraid of it. In keeping with that view she stated, “You don’t mourn for people today. You think of them, you remember them”.

#### **Self-responsibility: “I’m game for each year of my life”**

The narrative of her deep investment in the Aboriginal community is evidence of her self-representation as a person of authenticity. She believes in honesty in her actions and states:

I believe in telling the truth, and I don’t believe in making false statements, or anything like that even if it was my husband. He said, “If they [the police] come

down to check this, tell [them] you know nothing". I said, "But I do". He said, "You'd go against me?" And I said, "Well I'm not lying for you". You know you don't lie for anyone, you don't lie, you just tell the truth. I think this is how you get on in the world.

Her integrity is demonstrated in outspokenness against what she deems to be culturally inaccurate. The speaking of these views has, in her opinion, alienated her from parts of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community:

It does annoy me. Why don't they speak the truth about our people? The way we lived. To me they're hiding, they are ashamed of what they are but because the money's there, big money, they can't say, "Oh no, that's all lies". It's more important to tell the truth. I'm not one of them now. I'm not accepted by the elders.

In Auntie's view, the honorary academic and other awards received by her have been instrumental in this estrangement. Acceptance of an award from a non-Aboriginal source is held by some within the Aboriginal community to be detrimental to Aboriginal interests, particularly in terms of a perceived variance to oral history traditions. However, contact is often made to Auntie to discuss her conceptions of traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal lifestyles and information on available Aboriginal research, in contrast to the felt estrangement.

The complex nature of her relationship to the Aboriginal community is underlined by this need for authentication of the cultural experiences of her childhood, and her insistence on telling the truth, as she sees it despite others inaccuracies. Her viewing of the importance of insisting on historical accuracy was illustrated when she declared to me:

We need also to accept that our culture is a living thing that has grown out of the interaction between the past and the present. We ask no more than the basic human right of being given the opportunity to determine our own future.

Misrepresenting the cultural heritage is seen to have repercussions on the future. While she comments earnestly to me on the need for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community to be family, she is scathing in her criticism of the groups within this society who she feels have a disproportionate power of decision and operate on the basis of greed. She believes that her forthrightness is too confronting for many. She commented that in Aboriginal meetings, “I tell them when I get up there. I get them agitated a little bit”.

Auntie’s desire is to ensure that her remembered oral traditions of Tasmanian Aboriginal society are acknowledged. The writing of her autobiography is significant in her utilising modern means of formalising the past. To this end she resists, in her view, false interpretations of the community she experienced in her childhood. Auntie mentions the example of the representation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture as being more complex than her experience. She commented to me about there not being many aspects of what she understood to be her traditional Tasmanian indigenous culture and explained:

We didn’t know we had a culture, when we was at school, it’s only in the latter years, see we didn’t make baskets, we didn’t do that, make water carriers or anything like that, all that’s come from the mainland, it was just mainly stringing shells, mutton birding, crocheting which the women did a lot of, and collecting shellfish and that. I can’t see that there was any more culture than that.

While she does not appear to acknowledge verbally a wider view of cultural practice, throughout her narrative it was clear that there is embedded a sense of cultural involvement and identity of greater complexity. However, she feels angry that, in her belief, the lure of money from the government has encouraged the embellishment of activities not held by her to be Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural activities.

Nevertheless, this tension has led to a restriction in the extent to which she will state her beliefs. She commented that, “I felt like saying let us be individuals, not Aboriginals, but I know I’d never get spoken to again, that’s my opinion. We should not be Aboriginals, we should just be individuals”. There is a limitation to her honesty as she feels unable to

be candid due to the perceived community repercussions from a public proclamation of her beliefs.

To my mind, there is a tension in Auntie's narrative between individual and group perspectives related to Aboriginal issues. I view this as a collective-individual paradigm clash. However, I realise that my understanding and interpretation, as a white person, is as an outsider looking in. Nevertheless, my understanding is that her variance with others in the Aboriginal community can be viewed on two levels. Firstly, there is Auntie as an individual identity choosing her position on Aboriginal issues and enacting her lived authenticity in line with her personal value system. Included within her individual perceptions is her concept of the traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal culture of her childhood. Secondly, relating to the homogeneity of indigenous identity, there is a general understanding for most traditional Aboriginal groups in Australia that the individual is viewed as being part of a collective group.

The tension between individual and collective perspectives can be seen in Auntie's emphasis on negotiating her identity by acceptance of responsibility for choices in her own life. She acknowledged that important learning from the childhood contact with the 'old people' was in "...growing up, you follow your own path". It was a lesson that she has never forgotten either in her own experiences, or in her contact with others. She discussed how she encouraged self-responsibility and trustworthiness in the foster children by providing a loving and secure base for those individuals to develop.

This view of an inner locus of control (Rotter 1966) was instrumental in her continuing construction of identity through response to experiences in her life. I understood that self-responsibility was critical for her in her own enunciated *modus operandi*:

I'm game for each year of my life. In my own way. I feel you've got your own life to live. You make your own decisions. You don't go to anyone to make your decisions for you, do you? You're just an individual and you've got to act like one.



This is evident in her responses to her own poor health. Apart from the major stroke eight years ago, Auntie is a diabetic giving herself daily injections and controlling her diet. She has leg problems that severely limit her mobility; surgeons tried to get permission from relatives for the amputation of one leg while she was unconscious from the stroke, but no one was, she told me, prepared to face her when she awoke.

Although poor health could be held to be restrictive, it is her attitude that is most important. On the morning of the interview she recalled experiencing an intense shortness of breath which was only overcome by inner talk, “I’ve got to work this one out for myself”, which she believed helped to calm her down. She also did not access the button for emergency assistance or even use the emergency machine by her bed. Auntie has two cataract operations and a hand operation to be performed when she is well enough to endure them.

One area where she has been prominent in her life is in resistance to perceptions of traditional Aboriginal leadership gender roles. Traditionally, men were the leaders of Tasmanian Aboriginal groups and had, according to Ryan (1996, p.13), a “...reputation as a formidable hunter and fighter”. On several occasions she affirmed the important influential role of women in her life and in the Aboriginal culture as she experienced it, and was scathing in her summation of male influences on what she views as some important parts of life, such as relationships with family – particularly with children, decision making and emotional connectedness.

She stresses that women were heads of the household, motivators and disciplinarians as well as decision makers. Reynolds (1995) reported that active warfare brought a gender role change leading to women becoming more reactionary. Bonwick (as cited in Reynolds 1995, p.49) describes how one woman, Walyer, “...rose like a Joan of Arc amidst a nation of warriors, to deliver her people...and urged a band to violence and war by her appeals, and by her courageous conduct in the field”.

Auntie's own lived experience assists her in further maintaining that this was a Tasmanian Aboriginal arrangement. According to her the men's major role is as the money earner; she emphasises in her autobiography in respect of leadership and decision making that, "They [the men] bring a wage home and that's about all. The men might think they are, but not in the Aboriginal community". Auntie is definitive in her comments, and the tone of her voice communicates depth of feeling for the topic:

My mother taught us so much and not so much Dad, because women was always the head of the house, I thought, as I was growing up. There was never any decisions made by the father it was always the mother. If we wanted to go somewhere we asked Dad and he would always say ask your mother. She was the one that would say yes we could go. Oh no, he was just on the outside.

For Auntie as a woman, this perception of gender roles was illustrated by her making the decision to assist with foster children without any consultation with her husband. She further believes that empathic understanding is limited to the women in contact with young people. She claims that, "And it's the women that do it, the men don't see it, the women see it. The women see the pain in these young boys' and girls' eyes".

Auntie's resolve to make a difference as an Aboriginal is encouraged by the changing perception of Tasmanian Aboriginal gender authority. There is support for the position that Tasmanian Aboriginal women have had greater influence in the past than is generally acknowledged, and not just at the times of the Black Wars (Reynolds 1995). Matson-Green (1994 as cited in Ryan 1996) endorses this opinion by asserting that, "Pallawah [Tasmanian Aborigines refer to themselves as Pallawah] women are great initiators and fierce fighters, especially when it comes to protecting our own and fighting for justice".

### **Resource characteristics: "I've always looked on the bright side"**

Characteristics that are integral parts of her positive way of viewing her life experiences include determination, involvement and a demonstrated passion for life. Her long

recuperation from the stroke she suffered and the reciting of a poem in her primary classroom despite the negative expectations of her teacher are examples of her determination to overcome adversity. Furthermore, throughout her life there has been constant support and involvement, both from her direct family groupings, and within the Aboriginal community. Her words, “You get in and you do it” have been followed by actions. She explains further that:

You’ve got to have that passion that you can do these things, and that you’re going to do it. That’s very important too. You set your mind to doing these things and you do them. You don’t stop and think, “Oh, can I do it?” No, you can do it.

Her positive attitude to life is exemplified by her feeling that she is lucky. It is clear, nevertheless, that her involvement and self-control over the efforts she has made in her life have often influenced her outcomes. As she asserts:

I feel wonderful wouldn’t you? I’ve never got down Paul, I’ve never let myself get down. I’ve always looked on the bright side of things I think not the bad side. A lot of people think oh no... I always look on the good side.

Intrinsic motivation would also appear to be an influence in her life. She feels she was born naturally curious, and on a daily basis completes the newspaper crossword, and frequently reads quiz books. She likes to have fun, though she feels her ailments often hinder enjoyable physical activities. She nevertheless quipped, “If I had a wooden leg mate”. All the same, she does occasionally go out with friends to share laughter.

Her effective inter-personal communication is a thread that runs strongly through Auntie’s life. Her writing was publicly acclaimed, and her avid reading has been mentioned earlier. She is now asked to talk to groups of children, and talking is a key part of her day. However, as she rejoined to me, “I hate gossip”. She believes that throughout her life she has been able to talk with people of all ages, from the elders of her childhood to the foster children and troubled youths of today.

Auntie recalled an event, which I identify as a minor epiphany, that led her to not being judgmental about an individual's capabilities, in effect to be accepting of others and their individual potential. It involved her initially disbelieving her son's claim to athletic prowess because "...growing up he was very sickly, and very thin". However, on attending an athletic meeting in which he was running, she saw him win by a substantial distance. As she recalled her amazement, "...that was the most incredible thing that happened to me. 'You can run Philip, you can run'. Him telling me, not that I didn't believe, but I didn't think he was capable of doing these things".

**Response to change: "The heart that loves is always young"**

Auntie's story stands out for the integration of past, present and future. She sees the past, particularly her childhood with its powerful cultural influences, as being salient to her process of identity development. Her perception of Cape Barren is as a place of symbolic and perhaps mythical significance as a representation of the cultural ties to her people. She describes, in her autobiographical writings, her visits after many years of absence and the experienced re-connection with memories of the people in the place. She warmly declared to me, "Cape Barren I think is important to me, I want to go back... the heart that loves is always young".

The past is never distant from the present for Auntie. Present day activities include a regular day of rising early, reading the local newspaper and attempting the crossword, before medical tests and breakfast. Her day is generally related in some way to the Aboriginal community, whether planning for a future event, such as a talk on an aspect of Aboriginality, or by direct contact through visits or the telephone. She indicated that some of these community contacts were from people requiring financial assistance, requests she never denies if she has the means to satisfy them. Apart from a weekly nursing visit she generally attends to housework and associated tasks such as bill paying. Her lifestyle of involvement she feels is scaled down from the intensity of a few years

ago, but still retains a vital edge of active interest and participation. Her satisfaction with the present is exemplified by her deliberating:

What more should I require, books, children, leisure, all my hearts desire, and I think that covers me. I love living. Life is so important to me, and I feel as though I'm going to go on and on and on. I'm not going to get old. If I could do more I would but because of the leg problem, I can't do it.

While these words could appear to herald a quiet and introspective life, in contrast she has a number of plans in mind. For herself in the future she has planned to learn to do the Irish jig when her leg improves, and to make other trips to what she still considers her home, Cape Barren. She is particularly passionate about providing further support and assistance for troubled Aboriginal young people to develop self-reliance and qualities of resilience. In particular, she feels that there is a need in the future for an affective focus for troubled young people in the community with her view that, "They're looking for love, they're looking for compassion, they're looking for someone to say, "Yes we do trust you, we do care about you". This is a giving that is also a receiving for her, in the motivation her passion for this cause promulgates.

Auntie's narrative resonates with her drive to bring about positive change in the Aboriginal community in Tasmania. Apart from her contemplated assistance to young people, she has conceived a book on the shells used traditionally. She is adamant that a book would enable Aboriginal people here to learn about the Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, and not (as she criticises strongly) the mainland Aboriginal culture. She comments that she is outspoken to her peers that, "You've got to start here. You crawl before you walk don't you?... You don't live over there, you can't get over there, it's here that you want to work on it".

These are not empty words. The declarations of her varied intentions for a worthwhile future symbolise Auntie's tireless efforts to support and make a difference to the Aboriginal community. She has proudly encouraged self-reliability for individuals and

continuity and respect for cultural traditions. It is ironic therefore, that she feels in conflict with some parts of the Aboriginal community as earlier mentioned, “There is a bitchiness, getting grizzly with one another, and I can’t hack that”. She perceives a distancing of her by other elders, and her feelings are clearly hurt by this antagonism. She thinks that this is strongly influenced by her efforts for the community in innovation, learning and through her honest responses in open debate. Her achievements, in effect, paradoxically separate her from her people.

### **Reflections: “There’s always something new for me to do”**

The intended focus of this study is on agelessness. For Auntie, the influence of age has not altered her choices, beliefs, or actions. Embedded within Auntie’s narrative is her attitude towards age with striking disregard for, and stated lack of age-related conformity to stereotypical expectations of any age. While she says she doesn’t feel any age on a daily basis, when pressed by a direct question she, after some thought, felt her age to be twenty-seven to thirty-seven years less than the chronological fact. She does display resistance to occurrences of observed island lack of longevity, with age of death often being, as she observed, around fifty. Interestingly, the traditional respect shown to elders, due to age, within Aboriginal communities is not regarded by Auntie as being significant by itself; her deference is for the individual regardless of age.

Auntie’s re-creation of her identity is a central notion of her narrative. Her attitude to change and new learning is that of a vibrant learner unaffected by age. Her view of herself in undertaking change, whether within or outside of her control, is demonstrated by her regarding herself as having the qualities necessary to confidently respond to new situations. In listening to her narrative, an enlargement of understandings of her lived agelessness was established through epiphanies and the characteristics developed and demonstrated in response to her recounted life experiences.

A key early life epiphany where her views developed concerned the visits to the elders, and was important to Auntie in the inculcation of tradition through activities such as

sharing of stories. Underlying tenets related to age and the role of community were influenced by the learning from those shared times. Furthermore, her mother's role at the time of the polio outbreak, which I view as a major epiphany, was also important in changing her consciousness toward helping others, and was influential in the decisions to assist others in her life. From our discussions, I form an image of Auntie as a generous, accepting, adaptable person who believes in living her life simply by sharing what she has with others. By her action in taking in foster children she simultaneously resisted the normative family gendered role of the mother at home, and extended the role, thereby following her mother's example.

The simplicity of island lifestyle and epiphanies described were influential in her involvement with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Throughout her discussion of some of the complexities in being a prominent member of an active and identifiable cultural group, the desire to live life simply according to a humanistic value system is always present. She re-iterated that "The simple life that's what made me like I am... carrying wood, living in a tent, baking over an open fire, cooking and that, yeah I'd go back to that kind of life if I had my way".

Auntie enacts a self-representation as a change agent by positioning herself as an Aboriginal conscience based on a desire for authenticity of her direct life experience. However, this reveals both a strength of determination for her opinions to be heard, and a fragility based on community criticism of her efforts. This is illustrated by a tension based on the struggle to retain a free-thinking and independent stance, while simultaneously upholding her view of valid Tasmanian Aboriginal traditions and resisting some Tasmanian Aboriginal community collective norms of unity.

Her family involvements and voluntary community assistance were all achieved in an active and highly time-consuming manner with her in the role of agent of change. This is a characterisation she continues to fulfil, in an authentic and humanistic manner, through attending to perceived Aboriginal community needs. Persevering despite any discovered difficulties, she has encouraged the development of individual self-esteem, especially in

young people, based on giving assistance in conjunction with taking responsibility with integrity.

Several internal inconsistencies are noticeable in Auntie's narrative. In conflict with a strong belief in demonstrating authenticity, that she was not prepared to state her view "let us be individuals" to Aboriginal elders is contradictory in terms of authenticity. Furthermore, she values the effects of formal education, in particular, noticeable in her own efforts, in her writings and by suggesting Tasmanian Aboriginal young children would benefit from more formal educational involvement. This is despite accentuating the importance of informal learning from life experiences, and is also at variance with, and may also be opposed by, many in the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. The inconsistencies noted highlight the demonstration of characteristics prominent in her value system in some situations, and not in others. Contextual boundaries for some actions would appear to be made on the basis of perceived consequences.

While being strongly influenced by the past, Auntie has not allowed herself to be stranded in that time period, but has continued to value her present experiences by asserting that she is part of a living culture, as well as continuing to plan for the future. She commented to me that, "There's always something new for me to do, yes, so at the moment life is wonderful for me".

Her attitude towards adversity has always been one based upon communication and empathic understanding, and this led her to tell me, "My life has been fulfilled. I've had a wonderful life". Despite health restrictions, Auntie's resilient and positive attitude predominates. After I asked her for a description of the direction she saw her life moving in, she replied that, "Mine is going up all the time. I started at the bottom and I went up and up and I got to the top. Maybe I'm coming down this side I don't know... I really feel that as though I'm still up there". She is, however, cognisant of her continued perseverance through adversity:



I can still enjoy life...what I've been through in the last eight years, previous to that is rearing the family, all those state children, going out into the community and working. It means that I can still live a life you know, that I can still help people to do things.

### 5.3 CASE STUDY TWO: Tranh

#### **Tranh's journey: From "the summerlight of childhood... into a world of uncertainty".**

I spent high schooling in Quang Ngai province. The war went on beyond my conscious explanation and imagination. The green rice fields with their endless waves in my village, the innocent laughter of my little friends, and the warm cuddling of my mother took away the ugly side of life. But this didn't last long for me. Unfortunately one day I found planes replacing birds in the sky and the sound of bombing became a daily reminder of a different existence. From then my childhood opened a new window of reality. I reluctantly kissed goodbye to the summerlight of childhood and walked timidly into a world of uncertainty. I started to notice the absence of the innocent laughter of children playing in the neighbourhood. The breeze no longer brought along the soothing flute melody from nearby green fields.

Tranh explains his own emergent realisation of "the world of uncertainty" occurring at this point of transition from childhood. His early life was located at the site of one of the major wars of the twentieth century, a war that was to provide the impetus for his later departure from his country of birth. This exit led eventually to a career, continued to the present day, as a senior lecturer in linguistics in English, his second language, at a Western university in Australia.

Tranh leant forward in our interviews, his voice varying between a whisper and a louder, more energised tone. He has a medium build with long strands of combed-over hair, a distinguished looking grey, and he talked to me with a gentle passion. He exudes confidence in his ability to communicate and his tone during much of our interviews is enthusiastic.

Tranh talked to me of his life as a journey. A journey viewed literally in terms of impactful movements from place to place. Movements in distance from established small village life in Vietnam at a time of escalating incertitude, to the turbulence of Vietnamese city life encompassed by a civil war enacted against the backdrop of the world stage. He compares this journey metaphorically to a stream with rocks in the water representing obstacles that lead to changes of direction, and which I identify as epiphanies in his life.

**Epiphanies: “Now everything is anew”**

A number of Tranh’s epiphanies happened in Vietnam. Firstly, his father dying when Tranh was five not only influenced important parts of his future life, including where the family lived and the corresponding opportunities available to him, but also in a society with a strong patriarchal influence, the expectations of his male-role in a father-less family. A second epiphany was a moment of realisation of his need to reluctantly respond to his sense of insecurity, and the resultant reaction to the social change brought about by the encompassing Vietnam War. A third epiphany was the receipt of a postcard from France expanding his imaginative horizons of what a future life could be like by the display of a peaceful picture. The picture contrasted strongly with his everyday war experience, and had a pertinent influence on the fourth epiphany, a visit to the Australian Embassy in Saigon. Also, the influences of the teachings received from his meeting with a poet-philosophy lecturer at the university he attended in Saigon resonated with him and is demonstrated in the way he has learned throughout his life, and furthermore, in the responses he has made to life experiences. I see this meeting with the poet-philosophy lecturer as a further epiphany.

More recent epiphanies (his sixth and seventh) in Australia have illuminated his view on age. Firstly, his mother saving to buy a house at the age of ninety four highlighted, for him, the possibility of a future perspective at any age. Also, he recalls an “old man”, in Tranh’s words, seen driving a bus in his local suburb. The way the driver performed this action, and the perceived age of the driver, encompassed and reinforced an awareness for Tranh of the freshness of learning available at any moment from life experiences, as well

as the modelling of actions unrelated to a specific age. This narrative considers later the epiphanies that have affected Tranh's life.

Tranh elaborates on the three momentous moves in his life, which to me signify a chronological plot of four acts. Firstly, there was village life in Quang Tri near to Hue in central Vietnam, followed secondly by a move at the age of five to Quang Ngai, a small city nearer to Saigon, as the city was known in his childhood days. The large and tumultuous city of Saigon was his third residence while Tranh studied at university and acquired a degree, providing a springboard to the fourth act, a move to Australia for doctoral studies in Melbourne at twenty two years of age.

While these moves can be listed chronologically and might be seen to provide the plot outline for key occurrences, which I view as epiphanies in his life, Tranh does not view his life in that way. In contrast, he views the flow of events in his life as not having a sequential or logical order and he feels that the lived experience of his life-course is more aptly and symbolically constructed by viewing his life as travel along a stream, where the experience of life is always fresh. He explained that, "I live every moment as it comes. Now everything is anew. So to me, any course or event is... like a stream, like water. Certain parts go faster because there is a rock down there".

The events I view as epiphanies, he describes as rocks in the stream of his life experiences. He acknowledges the events occurring – the rock being there – but believes that the event in itself was not as significant as his response to it. In effect, the flow of life continues despite the obstruction caused by the event. This view would firmly suggest his actions in dealing with life occurrences are paramount to him. He gave as an example his view about his lengthy tenure at the university where he is presently employed:

Some people think that living and working thirty years [in one job] is boring. I don't see that at all, because I live each lecture as a new experience, a new inspiration. It's a fresh wind, so it's not the event itself. It's how I make it,

interpret it, and live it. To me, that is what is important and meaningful to me... If we live then everything is living.

**Childhood context: “The age of childhood innocence”.**

Tranh began the story of his early childhood environments starting in Quang Tri village. The prominence that he gave to this area of his story influenced the positioning of the entry in this narrative. Tranh explains the outside influences on his small village life in central Vietnam, which even at that time were pressing in on his childhood experiences. He lived in a small country village near to Hue. However, just after his birth the country was divided after international intervention into two parts. The demarcation line was close to his village and the potential insecurity of the border inspired the family to move to the South.

At this insecure time his father died, with a resultant profound impact on the family. Tranh was five years old, the second youngest in his family with one brother and four sisters, and apart from creating the personal stimulus for moves in location, the epiphany of his father’s death produced this response:

...because he died when I was very young, I didn’t really have any kind of sentimental attachment and I didn’t have anything to miss. You only miss what you have, but I didn’t have it so I am quite happy with the picture and feel satisfied with the environment. So my father is a kind of image... that arouses in me a strong emotion because of the family feeling, but for me, it is too remote to make me feel good or bad in any way.

He discussed the loss in terms of word pictures, as though the scene in his memory is a complete visual picture. He commented, “I am quite happy with the picture”, and similarly, there is a sense of a completed vision in terms of the environment he described. It appears that the memory is sealed in a way that the emotions can be contained, and as he further comments, he “feels satisfied” with how he views his father’s death. However,

despite the emotional containment, the impact of his father's memory is still prominent, even if no positive or negative feeling is admitted.

Apart from the emotional response, the loss of his father's potential influence, and Tranh's perception of the likely extent of difference to his own life is notable. He explained to me that there were two sides to the resultant actions from the death of his father. There was immediate sadness but also, viewed in retrospect, the creation of opportunities that may not have existed if his father had continued to live:

...if he were alive, I could not be what I am, because a man in Vietnam makes a lot of the decisions. So we might not have moved to Saigon... So if my father were alive he may have said "No, why should I move?" And it could be an entirely different picture for me at the moment.

Tranh's own lived experience created an awareness of stereotypical expectations thwarted by the decease of his father. Marr (1981) confirms the traditional Vietnamese adherence to principles of male decision-making that had been advanced as "Vietnamese mandarins and scholars – all male – had nurtured and refined a clear system of oppression for Vietnamese women" (p.199). Tranh recounted his mother's comments of his father's tendencies towards heavy drinking and abusive behaviour, and it is likely that he would have been influenced in some way by this male role modelling. After starting to live in Australia he retrospectively viewed gender relations and influences in Vietnam in a different way. The understandings arrived at from disparate experience in different countries has led Tranh to re-appraise the traditional male gender roles that were more likely to occur, at that time, with a two-parent childhood in Vietnam.

This early rock in the stream of his life experiences is an example of Tranh's viewing of an event that was life-changing and had possible negative perceptions as bringing about positively perceived change. However, it appears likely that this is a retrospective view. At the time, his immediate response could have been very different.

There were considerable family and societal pressures being experienced and Tranh and the family moved again. This time the move was to a small town at Quang Ngai, the setting for the initial quote in this narrative. An illustration of the anxiety he experienced is evident in a children's story written by Tranh, and published in Vietnamese for use in Australia. Tranh represents himself as the leading character. The story is about the pressures on a young boy to be schooled away from his country home and to pass an examination as a means for further continuing his formal education. It emphasised the sacrifices the parents make to assist the child in obtaining success and results in conscientious efforts by the boy to study. Tranh mentioned to me that the following episode from the book was a recounting of his experience from this time:

In these last few nights, I have stayed up very late to go over all the old lessons. I want to get up early but I don't have an alarm clock. I have thought of a new trick: I shall tie my leg to the bed, and in my sleep if I move my leg I will be woken up.

Tranh's response from his memory of the time shows him as diligent and responsible in his desire for scholastic success. His narrative of self-representation tells not only about societal pressures, but also the necessity in his early life for independent thinking and learning skills that Tranh was expected to accomplish in achieving examination success. Despite the efforts made, this particular examination is failed, which means the boy has to admit his failure to the family. He again told me that he drew on his real life experience in describing the emotional plight of the boy:

I wander like a lost bird without a sense of direction. The days and months of separation from my family become meaningless. I think of the money saved with such difficulty by my father and mother during the days working hard in the rice fields.

Eventually returning home the boy is welcomed and not stigmatised by the family for the scholastic failing. Whether this was how Tranh would have liked his real-life story to

end, with the inclusion of his father, or whether this occurred in fact is not revealed to me. However, the burden of expectations at a time of family difficulty due to the loss of his father and the pressures from the escalation of the war are likely to have made the time at Quang Ngai the “uncertain world” he aptly describes. Nevertheless, it is apparent that confronting the necessity for intense study and having to deal with the repercussions of failure were experiences he encountered at a young age.

It was during this time period, when he was seven years old, that a postcard arrived from relatives in France. On it was a picture, that Tranh described to me as:

...there is green fields and a girl looking up at the cows and the sheep. It is so peaceful, and I still remember that image. It's so green and so peaceful, so beautiful, tranquil with a sense of the romantic.

I view the receiving of the post card as an epiphany for Tranh. Although the postcard's arrival did not immediately appear to have such long-term importance, he was able to perceive the possibility of a life away from his homeland. Tranh commented to me on his realisation from looking at the postcard that, “...the horizon is further than my immediate consequences”. For a boy enmeshed in a life becoming ever more influenced by the war, the scene printed on the card must have appeared an escape of the imagination, providing a mental image of the potential of a different, more peaceful and secure life. In effect, the postcard provided an important catalytic element in his growing realisation of the possibility of a change to the everyday rigours of life in a war-torn country.

### **Moving on: Saigon – “An endless walk.”**

The next move for the family was to Saigon, deeper into the war zone, when he was sixteen years of age. He is quiet about this period of his life in terms of the war; however, he qualified with a university degree from Saigon University in 1970. The difficulties and stresses of life in that city at the time are described by Davidson (1988, p.475), who recounted that during the 1967 Tet offensive by the North Vietnamese, “...heavy fighting



continued in Saigon for about two weeks". He further discusses the numerous street and alley battles that continued in the city for some time. Though Tranh never made it clear to me what his feelings and experiences were within the embattled city, it can be safely assumed that life for civilians was nerve-wracking, stressful, precarious and difficult.

During these days when the future was unclear, there was an event that I see as a further epiphany. Tranh had a meeting that he regarded as momentous when he was taught by a philosophy teacher, who was also a Confucian poet. Tranh's world view was extended by this teacher's imagination, stimulated by views such as that recounted by Tranh, who remembered being told that, "When you are born to the world you go in all of the directions, North, South, East, West and contribute to this world". Tranh further explains that the teacher also believed that whatever you achieve is not to be rejected, but to be accepted as a fulfilment in itself. However, a further message he recalled was that there is no necessity for repetition of the same patterns, and that new challenges can be chosen. Tranh feels that he was strongly influenced by his teacher in becoming more accepting of what occurs in his life, in his response to changing life circumstances, and from a lack of necessity to echo the past. Making choices to initiate and respond to change in non-stereotypical ways was encouraged by his teacher's views. The teachings Tranh experienced elicited for him a timeless sense of freedom in following the flow of his emerging ambition and opportunities.

Tranh's memories and messages from his encounters with the poet philosopher reflect a resistance to dominant cultural patterning, as well as simultaneously invoking a shift towards future prospects. I see this as Tranh further constructing a narrative of his imagination that later became significant when directional opportunity from developing events arose and a choice was available. The teachings of the poet philosopher provided for Tranh a variance between the complexities and uncertainties of everyday life and the flight of imagination and 'big picture' view entailed in the teachings. Nevertheless, the Confucianist beliefs of his philosophy teacher also provided a worldly connection. Views discussed, and mentioned by Tranh to me, involved a wide range of religious, spiritual and philosophical figures such as "Kant, Buddha, Sartre, Lao Tsu, Nietzsche, Zen, [and]

Pham Duy”. Tranh’s own writing includes the following extract of a poem from his teacher of those times, embracing both life and death, “I want to kneel down warmly kissing this earth, as tomorrow it will become my own bed”.

It is clear that key understandings transpired from the epiphanies in his early life, which, on reflection, provided him with the basis for later choices. Tranh summarised that, “I was conditioned in childhood and conditioned by the village culture so I got out and I looked at it”. Again the epiphanous rocks of his life were being negotiated in ways that resisted stereotyping and embraced change.

His next epiphany provided the basis for a change in country of residence and development of a career that has continued to the present day. As Tranh explained to me, a walk in the streets of the city of Saigon, “...an endless walk”, and a decision to simply say hello, culminated in an eventual change in lifestyle and a different country of residence. He described the event in his autobiographical writings:

One day, I wandered aimlessly along the streets of Saigon and suddenly in front of my eyes appeared an old building with the sign ‘The Australian Embassy’. Excellent! I told myself. It was so hard to find a native speaker of English to practice English and now, right here in front of me... incredible! How could I resist! My English vocabulary and grammar wanted to have a real life test. With a cheeky smile, I walked in without hesitation... You know, I didn’t realise at that time that this aimless walk finally marked a new chapter in my life: four children born in Australia, my fairy-tale and more than half of my life in a far-away horizon.

This epiphany for Tranh can be viewed in different ways. It can be seen as a coincidence or a happy accident. Tranh sees it is an event that only occurred due to it being precipitated by other, earlier occurrences in his life. In particular, he links the visit to the Australian embassy to the post card from France. The postcard, as well as creating an awareness of the potential for a different life, had also encouraged him to make the effort

to learn English as his second language, and to write to penfriends in other Western countries. These actions formed, in Tranh's view, the basis for the turning point to happen.

Although I consider the epiphany to be located as a turning point for Tranh, he gives more importance to the surrounding contextual events and deems the occurrence itself as, "...not quite that high in the hierarchy of importance". He explained that the epiphany only assumes the importance that it does by virtue of the impossibility of comparison with what else might have occurred, by being unable to see other possible futures that did not occur:

Just imagine that I didn't go to Australia, I could be Ho Chi Minh's assistant now, or I could be a teacher in a New York primary school, or I could be a soldier experiencing things that are traumatic. How can one say that it is a turning point in my life because we can't see the other turns?

He referred to conscious and unconscious thoughts that have an impact on the antecedents to epiphanies. The complex nature of his reflections on the salience of turning points illustrates his need to reflect and question happenings in his life. However, in the terms of epiphanies, as discussed in this study, the occurrence, observed retrospectively, was a major epiphany in his life. One view could be that if an event does not achieve epiphanous importance, then the life-changing event may well be another, different moment. However, in his life the epiphanous events did appear to have the effects discussed. Tranh's view of the importance of all events and antecedents creating the possibility of other events is representative of his view of openness to all of the events of life.

Consequently, the visit to the Australian embassy led to many scholarship applications to Australian universities. Eventually he was awarded a doctoral scholarship and left Vietnam. After his arrival in Australia he achieved his doctorate in the area of linguistics.

He now has a family with children and has taught for many years at an Australian university.

Tranh's life has encompassed many changes. The challenge of achieving academically in a non-native language is particularly exceptional. It is clear from his opportunistic choices that he has resisted potential stereotypical restrictions from his country of origin. In the response to the 'rocks' of his narrative he has crafted his identity. Throughout the telling of his narrative to me there were underlying foundations upon which his actions in response to the rocks have been made.

**Age and agelessness: "It never entered my mind."**

A major focus in this study is on agelessness and age. Tranh's attitude to age in his life appears to be a personal resource for the way he responds to change. Tranh resists age-related conformity in terms of the study definition. He believes his conscious thoughts are not aware of age as a part of any decision-making process in his life. He commented to me of his belief that he has a non-conformity to Australian cultural perceptions of age, and told me that age was a "terrible" word as it labelled and restricted people.

The ongoing construction of his attitude to age is demonstrated by his reflections and actions on age. He reflects on his awareness of age-related behaviours by himself or by others. He also demonstrates by his comments how he views age. A key aspect of his attitude towards age is in his perceiving that he has the qualities to respond to events in his life by resisting age-related stereotyping. The way he sees himself in relation to age affects his identity.

He related that on recent visits to Vietnam, the way others treat him is usually according to his age. Notably, age in Vietnam creates restrictions due to social conventions. He gave an example of how, by stereotyping him in a certain role related to age, a barrier was created restricting the interaction that could occur. He referred to the language used

to him by those younger than himself on a visit to Vietnam, and how it had changed in recent years:

Ten years ago they said Un Tranh, it mean big brother, older brother. Now they say Uncle Tranh. Uncle Tranh means the father or teacher so that made me uncomfortable to be open to them as a human being, as they only expected me to be open to them in the role that they expected me to fulfil. It was a hindrance to the openness I could give them.

Awareness of the age restriction that he felt from his experiences in Vietnam has encouraged actions unrelated to age, in Australia.

He feels that his ageless attitude to life has been influenced in a number of ways. Firstly, he emphasised strongly his mother's attitude to her own advanced age. He told me that she is presently 94 years of age and is saving to buy a house. I see this as an epiphany for him in his animated tone and strength of response as well as the precedence given to this story in discussing the topic of age. A second factor that he feels has played an important part is his positive self-esteem, by allowing him to behave and think in ways not influenced by others; as an example he emphasised not necessarily accepting the judgements of others on his actions. Thirdly, he refers to his Buddhist and Taoist beliefs, which he describes as viewing age as being relative. He comments in support of this view, "You can be old when you are young". Fourthly, he felt that a further momentous occurrence, that I view as an epiphany, had influenced his beliefs in agelessness. He commented:

I saw an old man go in a bus up the hill and suddenly when I saw that man I was filled with a lot of inspiration. And I saw not that he was driving the bus, but it was the calmness in the way that he was engaging in this work, that inspired me.

He felt that not only the actions of the person but their demeanour were memorable to him. In terms of his own ageing he maintains that mentally he doesn't acknowledge

chronological age. He told me of his feeling that age had nothing to do with him. He further explained to me that physically in his ageing, there were noticeable differences that can be limiting, for example to mobility:

Physically I'm changing but mentally I don't think there is such a thing at all. I don't feel old, or clumsy. I still feel very much, personally, like I was thirty or forty years ago. I am still inspired, still enjoying little things, like wrestling with the kids. We have a good laugh, and I still behave at times even worse than my young children. I remember, we were dancing silly and I did a couple of stupid things and they all laughed. But I don't feel that impact like, "Oh! I'm changing". It never entered my mind.

On one level, he admits to accepting his physical appearance changing with age but this alteration does not, seemingly, affect his mental approach towards the way he lives his life. However, on another level, he does disclose that:

I identify myself more physically to the young one, but not the old one... I tend to send photos of when I was young to people rather than the present photo. Maybe there is something I want to hide, some reality I don't want to face or something I am so proud of in the past that I want to share, I don't know.

Although there is a separation between his consideration of mental and physical attributes, mental aspects are more influential in his life than physical aspects. However, there is still some awareness of his physical appearance represented by choosing to send the younger photographic version. Interestingly, in his comments to me he talks of his body and mind wholistically. While he accepts his physical body is ageing, the sense of his identity being inclusive of physical presence is a strong one. He is aware of his inauthenticity in sending the photographs and is prepared to divulge the action, though isn't sure of his reason.

For Tranh, mental processes are important in his resistance to age stereotyping, and are synonymous with the seeking of wisdom that is dominant in his journey. He comments on the development of wisdom in the Vietnamese and Australian settings, highlighting what he believes to be a basic principle on which actions within these societies is based. In one society he suggests chronological age is respected by virtue of the wisdom assumed to be present, while in the other, age is categorised and perceptions of restrictions are applied. He commented that:

In Vietnam they say that when you get old you have wisdom. When you get on a bus, if you're old they let you go first in the queue. That seems to be showing something about age, but in a very caring loving way and I accept it quite readily. But I feel really frightened to see the Western concept. All the senior citizens flock together. When you go to the senior citizens club and the bowling club the event reveals the age division that I couldn't see in Vietnam. In Vietnam there is the thought of wisdom with age and allowing you to go first on the bus because you are representing the wisdom. Over here, it is nothing to do with that, it's just a division that you are too old to do this and that, so the bowling club is only for old people.

In terms of agelessness and its relation to culture, the examples given by Tranh illustrate restrictions from stereotyping that can occur in different societies. Restrictions limit the behaviour of the ageing person in both cultures. Tranh does not view wisdom as being linked to age, but feels that wisdom is more likely to stem from the learning that can occur in the way we deal with life experiences. Living wisdom is similarly not seen as an accumulation of knowledge, but for what he conceives to be wiser actions, such as, for example, viewing a person's perspective multi-dimensionally, rather than from one's own narrower stance.

Tranh views wisdom as being able to use strategies in following a belief system and a state of mind. He asserts that, "With wisdom you live peacefully in yourself and are creative and helpful to the environment... it helps us to live our lives with some kind of

co-existence and responsibility to the world". In illustration, he insists that in enacting his belief he wouldn't buy shares in companies he feels are exploiting people or natural resources, feeling that there needs to be a congruence between actions and words.

Furthermore, he criticises the use of the word maturity as being "derogatory". He believed it led only to categorisation through external judgemental factors such as when used for a number of years of age, as in the age-related 'mature-age student' category at universities.

**Learning: "I live every moment as it comes".**

Tranh has strong beliefs about learning and the significance of learning in life, and consequently it is not a coincidence that the career he chose was teaching. He is emphatic that learning is living, commenting, "I live every moment as it comes". He feels that learning occurs all of the time, that it takes place "...any moment of your meaningful existence whether you are conscious or not". He describes an analogy for the way that learning occurs in life as being like that of driving, "When I drive on the road I sometimes go left [and] sometimes right but I am still driving". He emphasises that for him, the road that is travelled in life can be regarded as immaterial, as he believes it is how the driver deals with the journey along the road that is more crucial. He sees that he is engaged in the opportunity for treating what is encountered on the journey in this way.

In relating his view that he will continue to learn throughout his life, Tranh continued, "...the day you close your eyes you stop learning". Tranh keeps eye contact throughout our talk in his office. He has a quiet energy in his speech, and his voice rises from a low whisper to a more powerful and animated tone. He states his belief that we are learning all of the time. In consequence, to him, one moment is not regarded as any more important than any other. He feels that the emphasis on any one day or event implies a lessening of the importance of any other day or event. He illustrates this conviction by relating how he does not like to celebrate personal anniversaries, graduations or even did not invite close family to his wedding day with his present wife, "...because it marks the day significant, [and] is nonsense, it's only significant in yourself how you live and feel".



However, according to Tranh learning can be restricted by circumstances. For example, restrictions can occur by being unseeing to situations of potential learning:

...if you are numb. Like when I was in a hurry, I jumped in the car and drove to university, and then I didn't notice anything. I was just mechanically doing what I should do; I didn't see anything new.

He believes another restriction can be by being in an unstimulating work environment. He gives the illustration of a factory where repetition, according to him, precludes much learning. He speaks critically of people within the existence of the false security of tedious employment without belief in what they do. He feels they are "mentally dead... if I behave like them I am dead". In effect, by conceiving that he chooses learning from all of the events of his life, he is effectively extending his empowerment regarding life events. For example, Tranh believes that although he finds the atmosphere of his present workplace unstimulating, he counters any environmental negativity by his own efforts in innovative teaching. This demonstrates once again that despite many years in the same work environment, he regards it as being an endless source of new experiences, partly from his own innovative efforts and partly from his response to what transpires. His response to the event, and not the event itself becomes critical for him.

He also suggests that the retracing of previous steps is not conducive to learning. For example, he does not regard as beneficial any retirement celebration that acknowledges the past. In support of this view, he quotes his university philosophy teacher as maintaining, "You can never relive the feeling you had yesterday".

Tranh appraises formal learning as being of lesser value than informal learning. He views what occurs in the compulsory education system as being institutionalised formal learning and closely linked to an analytic framework where, "...we bombard them with criteria or with Pathways [a state government literacy initiative]... and give them literacy skills and we do all sorts of things to perhaps justify our existence". Sequential, logical

and systematic approaches to learning are strongly criticised by Tranh as restrictive to learning. In his opinion, analytical categorisation can have a restrictive negative impact on learning.

Tranh believes that conformity results from the emphasis placed on processes of rationalistic learning in formal systems. He views the resultant uniformity as leading to "...moulding them into certain kind of students that we want". However, while he sees acquiescence as being the intention of formal schooling, he also feels that the surface compliance by students masks, for many, the unplanned informal learning that occurs. He refers to what he sees as 'game playing' by school children to satisfy the authority of the school, while still learning from the unplanned daily experiences of meaning to them.

There is an interesting tension between his professed beliefs against structural approaches to learning, and his having developed a career through academic success in obtaining qualifications and in teaching within formal institutions. Tranh told me of his immersion within the rigidity of the Vietnamese system and its resultant emphasis on conformity, and his building a career based on formal learning structures, while resisting formal influences by teaching in a style that more closely resembled his expressed belief system of learning.

Tranh does not view the formal learning institution in itself as being restrictive to learning. Although it is likely that the courses he has pursued and the learning environment he has taught and operated in have strong elements of structure, the opportunity for teaching courses innovatively and for students to learn in non-restrictive ways are regarded by him as important. He related that his approach to teaching followed those beliefs.

He returns constantly to his notion of living as learning, and states that "Living is anything you do to arouse you intellectually, physically and spiritually". Inherent in this comment is a belief in living as an active state, not restricted to any boundaries linked to a place of learning as indicated in his view of formal learning situations. Also reflected in

his comments is a regard for openness to learning from observation. He referred to the contrast between informal learning of life and formal learning situations as "...good to be innocent again, and now you [are] not innocent you can analyse any bloody thing".

In regard to age and learning, Tranh clearly believes in learning throughout life. His overall emphasis on learning as living, by extension leads to his view that "...lifelong learning happens every minute of your living". Inherent in his naturalistic view of conditions for new learning is an underlying motif that informal learning emerges from the experience of living. He explains that:

When I still have aroused in me some kind of curiosity, some kind of sentiment, so that it makes me think and see and relate to my existence and surroundings, then I think I will never stop learning, even in my dreams because I think it is all interconnected somehow.

The impacts of external events and movement to a different locality have assisted in providing additional opportunities for different life experiences. While discussing Vietnamese contexts for learning, despite comments of the prescriptive education usually provided, Tranh also relates that in his view learning continued to occur for people who, because of the war, did not participate in state operated education. Cyclo-drivers (the three-wheeled bicycle-taxi drivers in Vietnam) are given as an example of informal learners, "...their thinking, their wisdom, their passion", he exclaims.

His moves from one place to another are also viewed as creating an environment for learning. Tranh describes each place of living as forcing different interactions and consequentially an increased self-awareness:

Suddenly you meet people that you don't know, where in the village all the people I knew. So what should I do with people I don't know? So it opened up a lot of moral issues. Should I talk to them? Should I trust them? I think that in kind

of moving into a different social context, different discourse... has some kind of impact in the way you think and feel and see the world.

Learning from life experiences can, in his view, assist in being able to view world events from a wider perspective. The Bali bombings are given as an example, and he comments:

I see the guys who were involved in the Balinese thing, laughing. I don't like it. I feel sick but then I ask a question... in the past I tend to see issues in the way they were presented to me, now I tend, perhaps with a bit of wisdom, not to jump into a conclusion so quickly.

A major influence on the life of Tranh is the way he views death. Underlying his conviction that to be living is to be learning, are his beliefs about life and by extension, about death. Tranh has a vibrant and enthusiastic way of regarding and explaining his view of living. He laughed at the concept of living his life fully, joking about whether you could live your life half-full. However, the concept of living physically with affliction is his greatest fear. He spoke several times against his life being artificially prolonged, and the concept of independent control of his faculties is critical to him. He told me about his fear of becoming "a nuisance to others so much". He continued, "I really feel scared, because I don't think it's natural and I don't want it to happen... I prefer to live in joy rather than being physically alive and mentally dead". However, he doesn't include terminal cancer in the serious illness mentioned and feels he would accept death from this source more readily, perhaps due to less likelihood of artificial prolongation of life. For Tranh, social wellbeing issues are addressed in maintaining independence. Consequently, one area he told me he addresses constantly to assist in maintaining his independence is his health. After minor surgery he felt a need to focus on personal health issues and as a result changed his diet, "...not rubbish McDonald's", as he commented.

His eclectic spiritual views assist in his acceptance of the reality of death. He spoke of Buddhism and likened life to living four seasons, with death a natural part of the

sequence of life. He also referred to Taoist and Confucianist beliefs. He regarded as positive the thought of not knowing what will happen upon dying by saying, “I would love to see my body scattered around the earth and that feeling of death, it make me feel so fascinating to end it up”. When I asked him “How old do you think you would be when you die?” he replied that apart from knowing he would die he had little idea. He commented, “We seem to feel it’s still a long way away so I don’t see when I’m going to die... I don’t have the figure in my head”.

Learning is emphasised by Tranh as crucial in responding to change. Apart from learning from experiences that are outside our control, new learning is viewed by him as dependent upon different intentions. Although he suggests learning from perceptions of life experiences is important, he does acknowledge learning for specific purposes. He relates the significance of learning of new technologies in response to changes in society as being indicative of this type of learning for him.

#### **Resource characteristics: “How could I fail?”**

A dominant theme in his approach to life for Tranh is in improving human relationships with the people who enter his life. Human affective values are manifested as being pre-eminent in his life’s social intercourse. In particular, he emphasises the avoidance of hurting people, and the significance of acting with kindness. He stressed the importance of empathic understanding, especially when others do not meet his expectations and commented that:

In the past I tended to see certain things that I expected certain people should do to me. Now if they didn’t do the thing I wanted, in the past I used to condemn them or not be happy. Now I stand back a bit and I try to see a different reason, a different way, and it makes me less emotional about it.

Lived demonstration of affective characteristics in human relations is important for Tranh. I understand Tranh’s emphasis on relationships as integral to the meaning he finds

in his life. In his writings Tranh refers to Wittgenstein's "The limits of my language are the limits of my world" (as cited in Emmitt and Pollock 2000, p.2).

He stressed to me that he knew he would be successful in the choice of a teaching career because it involved human relations, "anything to do with human beings is the area of my consciousness, that is my interest dealing with human beings and that's the part I enjoy most. How could I fail?" He highlighted that these interactions, whether work-related, generally social, or more intimate, "...somehow tickled some direction in thinking and inspiration". He views his accentuation on interpersonal contact and communication as perhaps being partly innate, but mainly environmentally influenced by his life in Vietnam, where he recounts that the presence of people in close proximity at all times meant constant interaction.

I asked him to view his life as a book, and he commented to me that the chapters of a book of his life would be about the people who had affected him in his life. He feels that everyone he comes into contact with influences him in some way, and has a sense of pride in how he has interacted in his relationships with others, with a present focus on friendship and emotional closeness on many levels in his personal and professional life.

He described the present chapter as being what he terms, "...the poetic life". This involves an interactional affinity with the exchange of personal stories with others, and shared stories relating to people in common: "I have come closer to people now. I enjoy having them in my existence. I tend to think every day is always about other people and how I am a part of them and they are a part of me".

**Response to change: "You're tested. That's living."**

Throughout his narrative, Tranh discusses his ways of dealing with change. In his early years this encompassed change as a response to what I view as adversity, and in later times with him as a change agent and catalyst, utilising personal resources to assist others in providing learning opportunities. To come to another country from a war-torn

environment requires adjustment to change. What is notable in Tranh's narrative is the manner in which change was accomplished. In response to the events in his life, his comments reveal characteristic qualities that appear to be a personal resource.

The characteristics he has developed and demonstrated would appear to be grounded in a core belief that we may not be responsible for what has occurred, but we are responsible for our approach to dealing with the emergent circumstances. This is notable in his comments about the years that I view as adversity in Vietnam, and in the years since. He views changes as:

...part of living, it would be boring if you didn't have change. You don't have to treat it as calmly as a lake in autumn but sometimes you create [the change] and sometimes it's just a part of life, and it comes in and you try to handle changes with dignity and with kindness. To some people it could be destructive, to others it is so constructive. With the benefit of hindsight when you look back, it could be one direction or it could be another. You're tested. That's living.

His use of "You're tested" indicates to me a sense of personal challenge in the way he chooses to respond to change. Positive thinking is a characteristic that is noticeable in his response to change. His strategies in response to epiphanies include changing his thinking from perceptions of negative to positive. Underlying his approach is the belief that we can control our thoughts and as a consequence this reflects on our attitude. Also, he considers that the interpretation of events is to be viewed from different perspectives. As he comments, "Any life is up and down, but you look at it and make meaning out of it. No one can do it for you".

His father's death is an example of his understanding of a life change that, in retrospect, he views as resulting in many positive aspects. An additional example of his positive attitude is in his regarding himself as having general good fortune in life and that he was "...lucky to have life here, lucky to work here, lucky to have a happy family, but partly

you have to work for it". Again a comment that "You have to work for it" indicates to me the extent to which he feels he has control over the response to a change event.

Tranh's belief in positive thinking has been incorporated through the events of his narrative. I asked him where he felt that this attitude had come from. He felt that it could be environmental, from socio-cultural influences or innate, but he emphasised the importance of his response to life circumstances related to human interaction, and the effect on his state of mind of acting positively. He told me, "I started sometimes and things didn't go well with me, I could be negative but I made an effort to be positive". He recounted how also at difficult times he had been assisted by contemplating in natural settings such as "strolling along peacefully around the pagoda".

Confucianist principles, "a set of cardinal virtues" according to Marr (1981, p.58), appear to influence aspects of Tranh's expressed humanistic belief system, with a particular input made by his University philosophy teacher, as earlier discussed. These principles were transmitted from China to Vietnam numerous centuries ago and were the foundation of morality instruction in Vietnamese society for many years. Marr (1981) lists these Confucianist ethical principles as Benevolence, Ritual, Knowledge and Sincerity, as well as emphasising the practical nature of demonstrating the virtue of Righteousness, which he further comments upon as, "...doing what was correct rather than what was of immediate personal gain" (p.58).

Communication has played and continues to play a significant part in Tranh's life. Presently, apart from social and family interactions, it is critical to his working life as a lecturer in linguistics, a position he has fulfilled with considerable success. A further communicative context that Tranh discussed is in inter-generational communication. He mentioned to me that he has a wide range of friends of different ages, and while he did mention that mostly the people he conversed with were younger than himself, he rejoined, "Age has nothing to do with that. Because there is some people who just turn you off or you just turn them off".



Self-concept, self reflection and a sense of fun are other characteristics Tranh suggests that he demonstrates. Tranh regards himself as having a positive self-concept. He displays independence in choices of action and further relates that the self-belief of operating from his own belief system enables him to resist influences against his individuality, important in terms of resisting stereotypes such as those associated with age. He calls himself “unique” and explained: “...if I could live in a society during the war in Vietnam and I could survive and put myself up then now coming to Australia all things are nothing to me, and I laugh about it. So I think that is a positive self-concept”.

Tranh also includes self-reflection as a quality he values in assisting personal independence. He commented to me about his thinking on the topics discussed in the interviews. He regarded the interviews as, “A meditation process for me, a sharing process. It opened the window for me and fresh air came in”. His self reflection on a number of issues arising in these interviews would appear to endorse the display of that characteristic, including retrospective appraisal of what I see as turning points and acceptance of others’ viewpoints through empathic reflection. He also concentrates on inner calmness to gain “...peace in myself, so that I have a stability to handle myself and the world”.

Inherent in his approach to every day living is a sense of fun. It is a characteristic of his approach to teaching and to everyday life activities, though he does argue that some people can be uncomfortable with his jovial approach. As he comments, “I tend to joke a bit... maybe a bit too much”.

### **Reflections: “A very unique Tranh”.**

In considering his narrative I am struck by his disregard for the influence of chronological age in his life. His attitude to age when I focused upon the topic was that he felt unaware of his own chronological age influencing his life in non-physical ways. Although his attitude to age is not influenced by years, he is aware of physical differences in his body that are restrictive. He commented, “Ageing is just a word, it is meaningless

to me". I think that, from my observation of what he told me of his involvement in life, he does not demonstrate restrictions from his chronological age.

Although he has positioned himself as being unaffected by his chronological age, his awareness of age is prominent. Two occurrences, which I identify as epiphanies, I think reflect a growing awareness of age in recent years. Also, his comment that ageing was "the end of the road" would appear to connote a fear of what age may bring, in particular the apprehension of severely debilitating physical ailments.

A dominant theme of Tranh's narrative has been his overcoming what I view as adversity. Events such as the death of his father, the moves to different places, and living in South Vietnam during the ongoing and escalating Vietnam War, impacted upon his security. I interpreted Tranh's journey from his "world of uncertainty" as being driven by these childhood experiences. One possibility, as a result of these experiences, would have been to "play it safe" and to not take additional risks in making further decisions in his life. However, another option was to take risks from arising opportunities, and as a result of this latter course of action, changes leading to a life as a successful University lecturer in another country have occurred. However, it is interesting to me that the range of changes in his life were followed by thirty years in the same position, though Tranh explains that he treats each experience in a fresh manner.

How did Tranh negotiate his identity in the face of the insecurities of his early life? He emphasised the importance of the environment in his identity development, when he commented, "I somehow feel that with the childhood background of the war, the village environment, the human relationships, somehow I got in me a very unique Tranh. There is no other Tranh like me".

In essence, he responded to adverse situations by a determination to act on what he determined was within his locus of control. Firstly, it appears to me that he accepted personal responsibility for coping with adversity in his childhood environment, as well as the consequences of any decision he made. Choosing a positive approach to adversity

acted as a filter to the decisions in his life, and comprised a combination of positive thinking, a high self-esteem and a feeling of being lucky. These attributes assisted in his willingness to approach new and challenging experiences: "...it's not the event in itself. It's how I make it, interpret it, live it. That's what is important and meaningful".

Tranh metaphorically views his life as a stream and this image integrates well with the fluidity of how he sees his past, present and potential new life experiences. The rocks, being significant events in Tranh's life, did not, in themselves, hinder his life course, but the way the rocks of life were encountered and responded to has influenced his life experiences. A rich way of constructing a life is suggested by his metaphor for his response to life's changes.

He displayed resilience in his approach to adverse circumstances. A pivotal site for Tranh is his belief in the value of reflection and subsequent change based on experience. The significant events in his life that I view as epiphanies could have been viewed by him in different ways. Some, such as his father's death or the surrounding war during his childhood years, could have been seen to have negative connotations, while others such as the postcard or the meeting with the poet-philosopher were catalysts for possibilities. Importantly, all the events I see as epiphanies were eventually regarded and utilised as creating opportunities in his life, an endorsement of his positive view on response to life's experiences.

Having been a change agent in his own life and taking opportunities from the epiphanies, Tranh now offers others opportunities from his own resources. An important characteristic for Tranh is in the altruistic action of giving to others. Illustrations are his giving to his numerous students and to peers throughout the world, the sharing of skills and attitudes and knowledge in his career area, such as the convening of international conferences, and his informal interactive attitude portrayed in comments on his web-based university course sites.

Living is inseparable from learning for Tranh. A primary theme for Tranh is in learning from improving human interactions. His view is that the way we interact in life “...enriches our way of dealing with, seeing and interpreting the world”. For Tranh learning is not measurable in quantity or quality, but is inevitable through living; he commented, “I think, I live, therefore I learn”. He believes that an attitude of enjoyment is a key part of learning: “Learning is too serious to be taken seriously... the best part of human relationships is that all of us laugh together”.

In essence, there are a number of personal characteristics emerging from his narrative. Human interactional characteristics he displays include being a good communicator, promoting inter-generational interactions, and acceptance of the views of others.

Further salient characteristics include giving, being self-reflective, showing independence, demonstrating a sense of humour and being fun-seeking, showing determination, being passionate in his views, and an inferred belief in acting authentically. None of these descriptors are demonstrated in an age-related manner or context.

Several internal inconsistencies are noticeable in his narrative. These may represent unresolved issues or an unawareness of the inconsistency. For Tranh, sending photographs of a younger Tranh may suggest an action at variance with his beliefs about age. Another potential inconsistency was in the tension between involvement in formal institutions and his beliefs regarding informal learning, and I note a conflict between the desire for a freedom in learning informally and the confines of an institutional organisation. His mentioning of the conflicting elements in these inconsistencies would appear to suggest a level of understanding of the occurrences, perhaps as a basis for later resolution.

From my perspective, I wonder whether the insecurities wrought by his acknowledged childhood environment led him to seek safety measures that still reflect in his following institutional procedures. Though independence is a deeply embedded theme in his

narrative, there is still a contrast between the acceptance of 'playing the game' and his views on authenticity.

As I listened to Tranh's story, I had the impression that he was understating what he was telling me about the difficulties he experienced as a child and the hardship of life for him then. We only gain a glimpse of his emotional responses to what must have often been a sense of despair and a feeling of being trapped. Within his narrative, the apparent simplicity of his present life as a successful university lecturer masks the complexity of how this has been achieved. In effect, he has been a change agent in his own life in his journey from the small village in country Vietnam to his present life in Australia. Now in being a change agent he seeks to bestow the gifts he received on others.

His narrative helps us to better understand how adversity can be overcome. Tranh has demonstrated actions in critical times in his life, unrelated to age restrictions, leading to the development of his characteristics of identity. His decision to learn from life involvements has been critical to the fluidity of journeying down his stream. Overcoming adversity in his early life has led to the unique Tranh, and his acceptance of all that life conveys can be summarised in his comment, "What a bloody life. Enjoy!"

**5.4 CASE STUDY THREE: Annie**

**Annie's journey: "A little bit forward, a little bit sideways, a tiny bit backwards, a bit over to the right."**

Annie describes her life metaphorically as a path: "Not linear, and not in a circle. I suppose a little bit forward, a little bit sideways, a tiny bit backwards, a bit over to the right, that kind of thing". However, on all stages of her unpredictable, but forwardly perceived journey she chooses to strive to continue to learn, in particular through an openness to learn more about herself from whatever happens in life. The use of another metaphor, "double-edged sword", describes the openness that she regards as best facilitating her learning, while acknowledging the difficulty of learning when feeling restricted. In a sense this is a struggle for influence in choosing the path to be travelled.

**Epiphanies: "Without a comet hitting me, I have some control over the changes".**

Life does change so quickly and so often. I think the ability to deal with change is really the mark of somebody. That doesn't mean you have to ignore change and pretend it hasn't happened, like this isn't going to affect me, not just like water off a duck's back, but the ability to see that change is taking place and make accommodation for that. I do think of change often. There comes a point, as it did recently, where I had some choices to make about which way my life was going to go. I could do one of three or four things and I'm in control of how it changes. I want to be the one who determines. I mean I know I can't determine everything, nobody can, but to the best of my ability, without a comet hitting me, I have some control over the changes. The more willing you are to accept that changes are inevitable the easier it is to overcome them or accommodate for them when they come.

Annie's life has been strongly influenced by the change initiated by what I see as two major epiphanies. One was "a comet hitting me", an event outside of her control, and the

other a moment of self-realisation. After what she terms a “beautiful childhood”, what I view as the adversity brought about by the sudden death of her mother raised important questions as to the meaning she placed on her life, with the consequence of her choosing to re-evaluate priorities of her life course. The second major epiphany occurred on the morning of commencement of the new millennium with a sudden realisation that, “being by myself is enough”, a moment of self-acceptance that has had an ongoing impact on her emotional independence in relationships with others.

Apart from these epiphanies, a number of other epiphanies have influenced different parts of her life. These epiphanies influenced identity development such as her attitude to age, to learning, to some personal values and to self-concept. Epiphanies included the realisation that she had been born a girl when her father desired a boy, a moment of awareness during her childhood that the world was not neatly split into “goodies and baddies” from the influence of her German grandfather, her grandmother’s lived demonstration of characteristics not related to age, and her ex-husband’s approach to learning. Another moment of self-realisation, that “the world will go on without me”, related to personal mortality awareness.

She positions herself as a continuing learner, re-creating her identity from the accrual of life experiences. Annie feels that these moments have significantly changed her life and appreciates the importance of learning from events occurring over an extended time period. She comments:

I feel like it’s taken me a long time, it’s taken a lot of years to get to this point and I know its going to take me a lot more to fully realise what I want from myself.  
It’s not the age that matters but the accumulation of experience.

### **Moving on: “I’m enough all by myself.”**

We are sitting after-hours in Annie’s vegetarian café, in the central business district of Chingford, opposite a tree-lined square created to mirror English recreational town

squares of the nineteenth century. Prominent and imposing mature European ashes, beeches, elms and oaks are clearly visible through the café window. I am struck by the contrast between the European setting of the long-established park and the modernity of the café with its contemporary design of separate walls of carrot-orange and bright egg-shell blue, as well as the reflective polished chrome of the chairs and tables.

Annie fits in well with the setting. She is tall and slim with hair cut in an irregular closely cropped style, and dressed in fashionable non-matching and colourful short skirt and ragged retro tee-shirt. She leans forward, hands loosely clasped together, and speaks at speed in a low tone with high voice energy, the words often tumbling out untidily, on the topics we discuss. Her focus is sharp and many of her views have the sense, to me, of having being thought out, as though these are areas of many previous self-reflections.

Annie begins her story by focusing on the two major epiphanies earlier referred to; these are discussed in the order raised by her. Firstly, she describes a moment of self-realisation that occurred in the setting of the back seat of a car travelling on a coastal road in Tasmania, early in the morning of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000. Annie had attended the open-air millennium festivities in Hobart, and was not in a relationship at the time. She recalled:

There is something about spending Christmas and New Year's Eve single. It definitely made me think about the nature of it [relationships] and what I wanted to happen in the next year. It was the first time I ever realised I was enough all by myself. I don't need to think who the next person might be. I don't even care if there is a next person or not. That moment has stayed with me ever since then and I can draw on that whenever I want to.

Learning about herself is a dominant issue for Annie, and is discussed in more depth later. What was learnt from this epiphany is a resource she feels she can draw on at times when it is needed. She chose the feeling elicited from the described experience to continue to provide for her sense of emotional independence in her life. In essence, through an increased sense of self-acceptance she realised that she had no need for



someone else to make her feel a complete person. This epiphanous experience has continued to influence her feeling of emotional independence, despite having other relationships.

The second epiphany was the death of her mother when Annie was in her early twenties (she is now thirty seven), and was the stimulus for considerable change. The combined impetus of the loss of a close relative, the suddenness of the death, as well as the effect of loss associated with having experienced a sheltered and loving early life environment that Annie regards as “absolutely blessed”, created a significant impact on her. “All of a sudden, we realised that we had been dragged into the real world and I don’t think anyone coped with it especially well”. She went on to discuss how her elder sister became a heroin addict almost immediately, while her younger sister continued to live reclusively with her father. Annie, in her grief, went through a difficult reflective process and for the first time considered the concept of death. Consequently, these reflections resulted in an epiphanous moment, “I eventually realised that the world would go on without me. On one hand it was a crushing blow but on the other it was totally liberating”.

In essence, her response to the adversity of her mother’s death was to experience the emotional response authentically, but also to eventually focus on the positive opportunities presented by the event. This response pattern is noticeable in the way she deals with later epiphanies in her life.

Her mother’s death had several consequences. These included an increased appreciation of facets of life, choosing to have children, a later emphasis on developing characteristics in her children she thought were likely to develop resilience, and a strong determination to be authentic in the way she lived her life.

She started to value day-to-day life more highly and this affected her beliefs and future response to life. The epiphany of understanding that the world would go on without her has, for example, impacted in her heightened appreciation of aspects of everyday life:

...basic things like a leaf falling in front of you on a windy day. You can see the incredible beauty in that so you can value something so simple and those sorts of things I notice a lot more now.

### **Childhood context: “Wonderful glory time”**

The story of Annie’s life is recounted to me as being two distinct phases separated by her mother’s death. The initial phase continued past childhood into her twenties and her narrative describes how, despite being sheltered by wealth and love from potential vicissitudes, there are the stirrings of self-reflective learning and a desire for a lived authenticity. The second phase effectively altered her view of life and especially actions that dealt with change and the role of learning in ongoing re-creation of her identity.

Annie views the interface between the two phases as:

Nothing bad happened to me or anybody that I really cared about [until] my mother’s death occurred. She wasn’t ill and nobody was expecting it. She died suddenly in very traumatic circumstances and that did change everything for me, and a lot of people around me. We had this wonderful glory time and rather than having good and bad happen all the time we had all good, and then it seemed like it would be all bad.

Initially I viewed the description of her early phase as a protected comfort zone where positive elements prevailed. Included in these were the constant love of her mother, and the “complete unconditional love” of her grandparents. However, despite the wealthy background of her early years, she now reflects on the effect of the control that these significant and influential people had:

When I was younger I felt I didn’t have the wherewithal to be able to stand up and say this is what I want. I felt engulfed by wealthy people who dominated... I felt

that they had some kind of inalienable right to be able to determine something of my life because of the power of their wealth. I don't respect that anymore, I don't respect power used in that kind of way and having less respect for those kind of structures certainly has given me more freedom.

Annie's determination to be genuine in the way she lives her life was also catalysed by reflections on her mother's death. The complex nature of her relationship with her mother, she now realises, only operated on what her mother allowed herself to show, including hiding a drug problem that only became known to her daughters after her death. "She hid so much", Annie says in an exasperated tone. Her mother's concealment resulted in a lack of genuineness, according to Annie, attributing the behaviour of her mother to:

She didn't feel confident to be herself with the people who she cared about. She could only be a little bit with this person, a little bit with that person, she had it all very compartmentalised. My children growing up know me as I really am, and that's very important to me because I don't want one day to topple off a pedestal because I'm never going to be on one.

Annie feels the overall effect of her mother's death has been to make her emotionally stronger from the adversity. An increased focus on living life in the present is emphasised by a higher valuing of day-to-day life, both in natural settings and through her relationships with her own children. Furthermore, in contrast to her mother's perceived lack of authenticity, Annie desires to be seen to act in an open and genuine manner.

A dominant theme that emerges in her narrative is in trying to take control of changes in her life. This locus of control issue may well be a significant reaction to the lack of control and forced change felt by being unprepared and having no control at the time of her mother's death.

Annie also directly relates getting pregnant to her mother's death. Her first child, she now feels, was conceived as a replacement for her mother. "I'd say clearly it was because I'd lost a very important member of my family and I wanted to channel that love".

A further effect was in attempting to prepare her children for adversities in their lives. She talked of providing supported opportunities for her children to experience the world, possibly in response to her own perception of having a sheltered childhood and the heightened difficulties arising from the sudden hardship of her mother's death. I view her provision of supported opportunities as an encouragement to her children to try to develop personal reserves, in advance of later adversity. In essence, it is the provision of an opportunity she would have liked to have had, and can be seen as an implicit criticism of what she considers a negative aspect of her sheltered childhood, that the opportunity for emotional genuineness in response to difficulties was not offered to her.

Apart from the influence of significant wealthy adults in her life, other comments suggest that there are further contradictions to her "beautiful childhood" narrative of imagination. Foremost was the effect of her father's explicit desire for a son. While Annie mentions her positive, loving, supported and even sheltered childhood, she also comments on a visit in recent years to a counsellor, who expressed the view that that Annie had been "...born into a very unhappy circumstance, that I'd been born into a circumstance of grief". The primary reason for this judgment was her father seeking a male child. Annie responds to her counsellor's comments:

I knew she was right. I knew that I knew it as a baby. I knew that I knew it as a child. I knew that I knew that I was not quite what they wanted. I know how my mother would have felt. She would have been ashamed that she wasn't able to produce a boy and my dad would have been openly resentful.

Her reaction, as a child, was to try to be what she thought her father wanted. In particular, excelling at sports a boy might succeed in, in this manner trying to make him pleased with her. It wasn't until her early twenties that Annie had a moment where she realised

that she couldn't make everyone, including him, happy. "A very big moment for me", she commented. This epiphanous moment has affected her response to him and to significant others from her childhood, after that realisation.

Through this epiphany she became aware of an inconsistency between her view of her childhood and how she understands it to be now. From her personal point of view she realised that she had not been genuine in trying to make others happy, by being what she thought they wanted her to be. Her mother's lack of authenticity, revealed after death, heightened her understanding of influential factors on her childhood.

Annie places doubt on the accuracy of her recollections of childhood. After viewing recently found photographs from that time, she reflects:

I look back on them and I couldn't even remember anybody in any of the shots. I don't remember that little girl, I don't remember her at all. I know it was me because people say it was me but... how much of it was me? I've regenerated so many times since then and now, in all honesty I don't really feel like that little girl. I don't feel we have that much in common. If I'm privileged to be here in twenty years I think there'll be an awful lot more in common than between me now and a little girl of seven or eight years old.

Her childhood in essence becomes a narrative of imagination. The "wonderful glory time" would appear to have limitations in terms of her understanding of what was authentic. The feeling of not being able to be herself during her childhood has had an important contribution in her search for identity, a dominant theme for Annie. Annie feels that her childhood lacked authenticity both from herself and significant others. In consequence, the interactions between herself and her mother, for example, are brought into question in terms of honest exchange.

The metaphor of following her path provides an image of her negotiation of identity, and is mentioned a number of times by Annie. It is as though the path she was following was

not the one of her authentic choice and perhaps can be seen as a separate path or “a bit over to the right”, as she commented in respect of her path. The view she had of her life at that point was only one possible perspective. An insight gained from motivational ‘self-help’ books had a significant impact upon her in her late teenage years. In making a conscious choice to resist conforming to the roles and expectations of others, the books were a catalyst of self-representation for her: “My consciousness of me started. I realised that I didn’t have to toe the line and try to keep other people happy”. Her increasing self-consciousness led to a reduction in the tension of authenticity in Annie’s life between conforming to her perception of behaviour that would make others happy, and non-conforming to those expectations by independence in thought and actions.

Influences from her paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother in her childhood provided further inspiration to question elements of her value system. The moral simplicity of believing in a categorisation of good or bad was changed; she felt she’d accepted this concept from inferred examples such as cowboys and Indians, and the good fairy and the bad witch, but with the realisation that her grandfather was German, “I knew he was a good bloke and that’s when I started to realise that not everything was black and white. That was an important time for me and I’ll never forget it”. I think an epiphany for her was in the reality of the contrast between the individual as experienced by her, and the implied negative labelling of German people imbued from school history classes.

Annie’s resistance to the influences and embedded messages of her childhood reflects her evolving and conscious self-representation as a learner from the experiences of her life. A move to Murdoch University in West Australia followed. However, before the degree could be completed she moved to Sydney as her husband-to-be would not move to Perth. She ceased her formal university education and started a café business that continued until the sudden death of her mother. Her learning changed from being enacted mainly within a formal setting to informal learning from the changes occurring in her life.

I asked Annie what the chapters would be in a book of her life. She saw the impact of her mother's death as being the end of the first chapter, her childhood chapter. The second chapter, an adult chapter of learning by consolidation was commenced by the experience of living overseas. This was a move she instigated, to go with her new husband to Singapore where she created the opportunity for reflection on issues arising from her mother's death.

Central themes in her life recur. In particular, she focused on learning about herself and her personal needs for emotional and economic independence. Choosing a place away from Australia was an active seeking of separation from all that had gone before. In her time there she experienced a different culture to that of her childhood, and in particular noticed the poverty and the lack of opportunity. One effect was in developing a view of empathy with people who had fewer opportunities than herself.

Still seeking independence emotionally and economically, the changes necessary to meet those needs again became a dichotomy separated into what there was some control over and the "comet" hitting her. Her relationship started to have difficulties. Eventually, after the birth of her daughter, and a further girl, the relationship ended and she returned to Launceston with the children. She sought economic independence by choosing to establish a vegetarian café. Annie's committed efforts, practiced communication skills and a knack of creating an attractive environment have ensured an economically viable and popular venue that is leading Annie towards her aspiration. "I see it as trying to put all the elements of what I do together at one point".

Emotional independence was more difficult to accomplish. Another relationship several years later ended with emotional anguish after the re-emergence of the pattern of "trying to make someone else happy", in effect by being inauthentic. Despite the epiphanous moment that "being by myself is enough", trying to break an established and long-held pattern is still difficult for Annie. However, her present established relationship feels closer to the emotional independence she regards as a priority in her life.

The events since her mothers' death have provided her with the opportunity to reflect and learn from her experiences. Her response to the changes that have occurred is to strive for authenticity in personal relationships, and to provide a professional venue showcasing her personal skills and enabling her to provide for others.

A continuing emphasis on learning about herself has been significant in responding to the changes that have occurred since her mother's death. She has re-created her identity through learning from lived experience. Epiphanies have assisted her in particular to re-prioritise in terms of emotional and economic independence, as well as to develop personal characteristics, in particular, those related to acceptance and spirituality.

**Age and agelessness: "Because I can".**

Central to Annie's understanding of herself was in changing from the childhood pattern of fulfilling others' expectations to her authenticity of actions in her life. Annie is conscious of not being restricted by her age. The admiration for her grandmother affected her view of ageing. I think the actions of her grandmother in resisting age-based conformity in action was a catalyst for Annie in modelled agelessness, particularly as her grandmother's attitude to life contrasted with other people of similar age and position that she knew. Describing a series of events related to learning activities that was catalytic for Annie – and which I view as an epiphany – she gave illustrations of her grandmother's response to new learning:

She did show me that you don't have to be a certain thing at a certain age, and she never, ever, lost her youthfulness, never, never, lost any of it. When I was learning to ride a skateboard at fourteen, she was learning too in her fifties. When I was climbing trees she was climbing that tree much faster than I was... she definitely retained her sense of youthfulness up to her death. She was quite vulnerable but really really really youthful and quite curious.



Annie recounts her grandmother's modelling influence through non-age-related actions, in response to new learning. This is not attributed to any physical ability, but to an attitude that was not limited to any particular age. In fact, even the vulnerability mentioned related to physical shortcomings, but did not stop the actions occurring as they were based on a non-age-related outlook.

I asked Annie what agelessness was to her:

In my life it's my ability, I think, to not necessarily cave in to the expectations of our society, of what I should be doing at a particular age. That's what it means to me, the ability to be able to push through that.

Annie's use of "not necessarily" is interesting, reflecting her view of being able to choose her response regardless of age, and also implied is the pressure being put on an individual to not resist expectations. There is a sense of these societal expectations, in Annie's view, being heavy, a weight to be resisted and not to "cave in to". This suggests effort for the resistance to occur, so that it is necessary to "push through", an effort that requires ability. Ability is a multi-faceted word, suggesting an aptitude, capability or even skill to be able to fulfil a task. In the sense used, there are qualities necessary to actively seek to resist the pressures of our society. "The concept of agelessness, it keeps coming back to one thing and that's really not being too bothered to look like a bit of a dickhead". She further commented, "I think it's something to do with not caring if you look like a fool or not when you do something". Inferred within this statement is that judgement will be made by others as to the appropriateness of response, according to the age of the respondent.

For Annie, the issue of locus of control is important in her understanding of the concept of agelessness. She believes that a display of lack of authenticity in the way she could respond to a situation limits what is learned from the experience. Consequently, self-control on the basis of conforming to the expectations of others is viewed by Annie as an antithesis to agelessness:

If I was constantly in control of the way I responded I might not have so much of the qualities of agelessness. Because I am a little more open to my instincts or emotions, I think that enables me to be more open to a whole lot of other things.

Openness to learning from new experiences, influenced by the age-modelling behaviour of her grandmother, is regarded as important in her concept of agelessness. "You can still learn really big things about yourself at any time", she remarked.

Annie considers disregarding choice of context for the actions in our lives as being significant in the authentic display of identity. I ask Annie whether agelessness changed for her according to the context, in effect, not falsely playing roles or conforming, chameleon-like to expectations of others:

The lifestyle that I have chosen for myself enables me to be myself in any given situation. I don't put on different clothes to go and talk to a bank manager. I know that that will never work, it will never be convincing if I'm not feeling relaxed enough to be myself.

While acknowledging a link between physical appearance and perception of age, Annie feels she makes no special effort to look any particular age. However, health and physical wellbeing are aspects of importance to Annie. Maintaining good health is of particular value to her. She has no health problems, at present, is a vegetarian and eats well each day. She maintains that, "I constantly think about what I'm putting in my body". She also exercises through the demands of the job.

Part of her locus of control is through a feeling of physical wellbeing. "The way I feel about my physical presence definitely affects my confidence and the way I am in the world. If I feel my body is good then I feel good, and I usually feel like that". In relation to age she commented on feeling stronger now than when younger, and she felt that this was not a reaction as a denial of ageing as she also mentioned noticing changes in her

body in the way she physically looks, but does not feel these are restrictive to her health in any way: "If you ask me in five years time I might look exactly my age. I don't know what's going to happen and I don't really care. If that happens, so be it".

I also ask her how she feels about her age, and her response is that she is surprised at her age. She continued, "If I'm middle aged now then so be it, but it doesn't mean anything to me". When I asked further as to what age she would be if she didn't know what age she was, she replied:

Some days about one hundred like everybody. I never set out to not act like I was thirty seven at thirty seven, or act like I was twenty one at twenty one. It's becoming a bit of a surprise to me. It's not something that I ever intended, it's not some kind of ploy to be more interesting or connived in any way. This is just who I have become because of the sum total of the things that have happened to me up until now.

The re-creation of her identity recurs throughout her narrative. Central to the changes in identity is the understanding that the experiences in life are to be learned from. A central tenet in her learning is the irrelevance of her age in responding to the experiences. Her surprise at the actuality of accumulated years is more related to chronology than to astonishment at the experiences life continues to provide for her:

There are parts of myself that I see rising to the fore and there are other parts that I see dying away. There are some things about myself I would like to change, little things that would make my life run smoother. What basically I want is as stress free a life as I can have. The more relaxed I am the happier I am and the happier everybody around me is... I make an active choice that I am just going to hang with myself.

I interpreted her belief in herself as integral to self-responsibility for the way she handles change unrestricted by her age. She re-creates herself as being, "...the sum total of things

that have happened” despite simultaneously attempting control of those experiences. Furthermore, her drive is to learn more of herself and to move away from the roles she feels others are creating for her. She talks of “...not being able to match this fixed point of identity or gender. I keep pushing it out”. One important way she achieves her re-creation is by constantly choosing new experiences, “...new things to find out about myself”.

Annie links her demonstration of agelessness characteristics to her identity. There was a moment of realisation where she felt that her authenticity was impacted upon by her behaviour being aligned with the expectations of others:

I was in my early twenties when I realised that I couldn't make everyone happy. That was a big moment for me. Why try then? I haven't really tried since. Sometimes it upsets me that people very clearly don't like me who don't know me, but that's their problem.

The way Annie is viewed by others is not always favourable: “People seem spun out about it [her age]”. She feels that there is sometimes resentment from others at her demonstrating characteristics that others feel are not age-related. An encounter at her children's school with another parent of a similar age is an illustration of peer pressure on stereotypes of age:

She came up to me and said, “I've decided not to dye my hair though it's gone grey”. Fine for you, I thought. I know that some way that was a dig at me because I change my hair colour frequently, because I can. What do I care? I mean, you buy it at the shop and it costs ten dollars and what does it matter so I do it... My hair has been grey since I was nineteen, I don't know why, I have no family history for it. I had a white strip that looked like it had been dyed and I got a lot of shit then. Now I do dye my hair and they say, “Why do you dye your hair?” It's quite ironic really.

I pondered about Annie's comment "because I can" as being indicative of her attitude to life, unaltered by the filter of stereotypical societal perceptions of age. Throughout her narrative, Annie's determination of the course of her life within the areas of her locus of control can be summarised by this comment, "because I can". It describes to me her determination to act authentically, choosing her self-representation as her own change agent.

It also pre-supposes a choice in the way we wish to be represented. Annie commented, "It shocks me a little bit that through their own life choices people become so stereotypically aged before they needed to". The "before they needed to" remark would seem to imply choice of demonstration of characteristics, that this manifestation of behaviour was within individual control, and I push her for examples of how she feels that this occurs. Her reply is that she perceives people often put restrictions upon themselves as they get older:

People stop putting themselves out on a limb, stop being a little bit brave as they get older and not only do people stop but they try to stop you too. You can be an eccentric but only as you get older. It's allowed [then], you behave as you want to without really caring what other people think.

I take her view of stereotypical ageing to be, in essence, relating to people choosing to conform to perceptions of the age attained, taking on perceived stereotypical characteristics, and reducing risk-taking behaviour. Annie is critical of stereotypical views of age within society, especially in terms of societal expectations of retirees. She feels that there is a clear message given: "...in their sixties, seventies and eighties society tells you, you don't have to do anything now, you've done your stuff. In fact we don't want you to do anything, just do what ever you do then die". In her experience of living in Asia she noticed the respect conferred on older people, and the involvement bestowed from being an important part of the family group.

Annie relates well to people of different ages. She has close friends in their twenties, and feels labelling one group by stereotyping according to their age is limiting on interactions. “They’ve stereotyped them into a box. They’re a young person and this is the way young people feel. My younger friends don’t put me into that category because I don’t treat them any different from anybody else”.

Her sense of the social forces that influence us is prevalent in her belief that we have power over aspects of our lives that we do not fully utilise. “I don’t feel like this is the only way that we could live”, she explains. The openness to choose our path free from conformity related to age is an opportunity she feels is not grasped by many people. Fundamental to exercising the available control over our own lives is in knowing and understanding ourselves, according to Annie. “You can’t control a population who really knows themselves”. Annie discussed restrictive societal conditions in some previous generations where survival was, for many, more of a critical issue than at present. This included participating in a society at war, living within a major economic depression, or subsisting in poverty unsupported by social security measures. In Annie’s view, not having to confront such conditions has “given us the ability to learn more about ourselves”.

I ask her whether maturity is related to her age. She felt she did not understand the concept of maturity, but then commented, “I don’t like to think about maturity, it’s such a scary word. To me, there’s a certain austerity that comes with the notion of maturity that I hope to never find”. I do not feel Annie’s resistance was a denial of any attribute considered to be associated with ageing, as maturity often is, but more a resistance to being labelled and therefore fitting into any category.

A main concern for Annie is to be more concerned with acting authentically, and she does not view this as being in conflict with appropriateness of behaviour. She commented on her likelihood of genuine response to a social situation such as at a funeral:

I'm not saying that I'll dance a jig, but if I'm at a funeral then I'm probably going to be sad, and that's how I'm going to be. I'm not going to be stifling my tears so no-one sees. I'm actually going to be crying and if I'm happy I'm going to be laughing. I'm not going to be just smiling so people don't get offended by my happiness. I'm not going to do that. I can't do that. I don't know how to.

The authentic experiencing of life is a theme that resonates throughout her narrative. Her feelings about death are similarly unrestrained in terms of wanting to experience it, when it occurs. There is no sense of fear at the thought of dying and she affirms, "You cannot have life without death. Everything is a part of this endless cycle that we're all a part of if you want to be or not".

Although Annie's family is not religious, spiritual experiences have affected her. The epiphany of realising "the world will go on without me" at a time after her mother's death was seen as liberating. She also believes that formal religions are prescriptive and in consequence controlling, a view she resists.

**Learning: "I'll never ever be bored."**

Annie consistently focuses on the learning from experiences in her life, and an important part of her learning is about others and about herself. In elaborating on her response to change and learning she comments on big changes not being readily apparent at the time, but only in retrospect. What I see as epiphanies in her life have an impact on what is learned at the time, such as at the time of her mother's death, but also in the reflective effect of what is later learned from the experience. For example she feels her sense of priorities in life have evolved: "I've sorted out some things that I thought were important that aren't important".

Apart from self-reflection, Annie learns in several other ways. People in her life have been important in what she sees as both positive and negative respects. Learning from wealthy significant people in her childhood is different from the learning she has done

from others since that time. Her ex-husband was influential in helping create an awareness of possibilities of learning that Annie had not realised previously. When she was pregnant she researched pregnancy and childbirth thoroughly:

It introduced me to a scientific world and a medical world that I had no real knowledge of, and no real interest in before, but what it did teach me is that if I did want to find out about something and understand it I could. A part of that has been the children's father, because he fully believes that if there is a human being walking on the earth who can do it, he can do it too. Being with him taught me that I could be resourceful, and self-reliant and not have to give myself up to authority. I wouldn't be put into a situation where I would have to be passive.

Her desire to be in control of important parts of her life emerges once more. There was a reverse side to her ex-husband's influence that she acknowledges. When the relationship broke up she realised that as he was "...such a smart bastard!" she had been restricted in her openness to learning, through relying on him for her understandings. As she commented, "When I stopped looking to him for everything I had to look in the whole world rather than one person. It definitely impacted positively on my own sense of learning".

While seeing a value in both informal and formal learning, Annie is critical of the effect formal learning often has on school children if choice is restricted. She believes that it occurs:

...during the time when we are just starting to find out who we are, and if we are constantly told we are not good enough and we are failing, then it's going to be very hard to be able to find your own confidence.

Her later involvement in non-compulsory formal learning at university was, however, a positive experience as the variation in subjects she chose was stimulating to her. She chose to continue her personal development with enrolment in courses of interest to her



such as Structure, Thought and Reality. Although her learning was within a formal institution her perceived restrictions of a formal learning institution were challenged:

My informal study became concrete...I was blown out that this is something you could get a degree studying. It completely spun me out that you could be given serious credibility for learning something that seemed so incredibly interesting and fun to me...You had to study the nature of your reality and that was brilliant. It completely spun me out and was so interesting and fun for me. It taught me that the value of formal study could never be one single dry thing. Useful meaningful study couldn't be a linear visioned tunnel, it had to be broad, it had to be lateral.

She is a strong advocate of informal learning because "It's personal, you can pick what it is that you are interested in learning about". The sense of choice is again important for her as well as the interaction she sees as being a salient part of informal learning. In the café she feels that this occurs on a daily basis with people talking about what it is they are learning about themselves: "What I'm learning is about human nature, and I find that intriguing every single day, even you know my worst pre-menstrual days, I can't help but learn about people".

The importance of all forms of learning re-occurs throughout her narrative. The restrictions she felt from her formal schooling have dissipated through her response to her experiences of learning since then. She now views a synthesis of learning from formal, as long as it is self-chosen, to informal, as being useful, though her emphasis on the informal is marked.

Similarly, her view of learning has changed considerably since school years:

I understand learning as being more abstract, more lateral, more a part of everything. As a young student you think of it as a very formal thing, you go to school and you learn these things. You go home and set x-hours aside to do this learning and the rest of the time you are just vaguing off, the world is just

impacting on you and you're not actually doing any learning. Now I realise that I'm learning all the time and in all sorts of different ways. I'm learning from the people that I'm with.

A lack of self-understanding restricted her learning most. This, she felt, contributed towards repeating old patterns and resulted in an inability to change, effectively blocking new learning. She commented, "I am resistant to the things I don't understand".

Nevertheless, her self-understanding is assisted by confidence in her subconscious: "It seems so obvious that a person's subconscious plays so heavily upon their waking life. I spend a lot of time battling with it or even just being aware of it".

New learning for Annie can include self-understanding through experiences in life, and "learning more about the world" that occurs in the course of day-to-day activities. Present examples include learning to use the Internet and learning about movement through dancing regularly and having friends in a dance company. Typically, commitment is indicated in this activity through her comment, "You can't dance a little bit, you really have to do it". She is also learning to DJ through use of decks, mixing beads, these are different tracks on different turntables. Her determination is evident: "I am going to learn. It may take me until I'm 80, but I'm going to give it a go". However, in her business, commitment to learning can also be observed in her continually striving to make the best coffee. "Every now and then I really nail it with a brilliant coffee and I'll go, well that's pretty God-damn close... It's the act of putting that much into something that's important".

Learning for Annie is a lifelong process. She finds learning fascinating and exclaimed, "I'll never ever be bored. I can't remember the last time I was bored because there is always going to be so much to learn. I hope to be doing it the rest of my life". She is also part of a learning community through her everyday involvement in the café. Her clientele include students involved in formal education as well as artists, musicians and many other members of the public. As she comments, "Around me is a learning culture".

**Response to change: “It’s a kind of double-edged sword”.**

Dominant themes that emerge and constantly re-occur in Annie’s narrative include her responses to change, by the overcoming of adversity and by constant re-negotiation of identity.

Annie’s story stands out in her approach to change. The turning points she identifies have played a significant part in this. These epiphanies have usually emerged from what I see as adversity, but it is the way she has dealt with change in her life that is a representation of the direction she continues to take in the constant re-creating of her identity. As Annie comments:

I can see that an inability to adapt to change could stop you, could shut off your ability to learn from the world as well, because if you are already bitter about having to do something that you don’t want to then you’re not open to learning. In order to be open to learning I think you have to be in the best possible position that you can be in for yourself, or at least be heading towards something like that. I think if you feel like you’re in a position you don’t want to be in, but you can’t get out of, it’s very very hard then to use that time to your advantage, to learn what you need to learn to be able to change that. So it’s a kind of double-edged sword.

In essence, she is saying that openness to learning from changing life experiences, by interacting with the world, the available environment, lessens her powerlessness. I think this statement can be alternatively read as her not wishing to feel trapped. Her fear of being stuck in a changing situation where she has little control underlies the statements made, such as “inability”, “shut off” and “bitter”. She rejects stopping, sees not being open as restrictive, and an underlying meaning throughout is that if she is to avoid being ensnared then there is a need to keep moving.

I initially missed her symbolic use of the “double-edged sword”. A sword that is used to fight, but also to protect might be seen to have two sides. In the sense used one side is the being in a position to take advantage of the creation of new opportunities and learning that she often has had to fight for. The other side is “you feel like you’re in a position you don’t want to be in, but you can’t get out of”. After an adversity, such as the death of her mother, for Annie there was a need to defend and shelter herself. Her move to Singapore and the process of consolidation mentioned earlier was an example of her seeking a haven. Both sides can have their part to play in eventual empowerment. The emphasis however, is on the symbolic nature of a sword as a weapon to fight embodying, in Annie’s case, the need to ‘move on’. A sword also has a mythic sense, often being used in myth and legend to clear the way forward.

**Self-responsibility: “I don’t like being put in boxes”**

Her aspiration to not being restricted by adversity in future experiences has been important to her in ‘moving on’ from past experiences. She commented on “...not taking the baggage with me. When you have a lot of negative stuff carried round with you, obviously it does flow into everything that you do and into every opinion and reaction that you have”.

Annie’s response to change from adversity is accomplished in three observable ways. Firstly, she uses self-talk, a personal mantra, “This will soon be over”, said at the time of the adversity. Secondly, she engages in authentic emotional response to the experience. An example of this course of action was during her giving birth, “When I was in the real throes of the pain I didn’t have any pain relief because I wanted to feel it”. Thirdly, she creates a mental prognostication of a positive outcome; this involves a ‘big picture’ positive overview of the eventual result of the experience. She feels that the approaches she chooses have assisted her in becoming more resilient: “When things that impact on me the greatest happen, they were generally quite negative, but in the end have been incredibly positive”. One illustration is in the resultant freedom, later perceived, from the death of her mother, creating “the ease to do what I wanted”.

While accepting that adversitorial experiences often occur outside of her control, Annie resists the experience having a damaging effect on her future life. A summary of her deeply embedded notion is that we may not be responsible for what occurs in our lives, but we are responsible for how we respond to it. A positive way of viewing life is inherent in this choice, as is an expectation of potential difficulties in life experiences: “I think we’re meant to be a bit uncomfortable and a bit itchy”.

Her choice to view what occurs in her life positively was reinforced by her overseas living experience:

If I was my age living in Bangladesh, nobody would care or be bothered if I was happy or not. They wouldn’t give a shit. They would be more concerned about where they were going to eat and how they were going to live. I have the opportunity to be happy, even though I know there are a lot of pressures in our society that can make a person unhappy... Not just happiness to have a red Ferrari but a deep, personal happiness that comes from knowing yourself and knowing you’re doing the best yourself for the people you love, and not at the expense of everybody else, and I think that’s vital.

Annie’s decision to view life positively reflects firm values. These priorities of her life include non-materialism. She does not regard money as important to happiness, possibly influenced by the control displayed by those with wealth when she was a child, and in her adult life has always worked hard. She also tries to not harm others by her actions. On the contrary, she tries to assist others, and while acknowledging she does not try to change society, she comments, “My challenges are very, very tiny little challenges, but they are mine”.

Annie regards authenticity, viewed here in her actions as genuineness, as critical to the way she chooses to live. Earlier discussion referred to the epiphanous effect of her mother’s inauthenticity in what she allowed herself to show to others. The realisation of

her mother's falseness has, in some ways, strengthened Annie's desire to demonstrate a lived authenticity, with an example being giving birth to her children without pain-relieving drugs. This is also evident in the way she interacts with people: "I don't change, whoever I'm with, I can't. I've done that before and I know that I can't actually pull it off". In essence, it is implied that it is possible for her to try to play a role, but also to choose the authenticity of not doing so, as related in the example given of her likely response at a funeral.

She feels she was inauthentic in her childhood. Earlier reference was made to her father seeking to have a son. After her childhood attempts to play a role supporting his preference, she now feels she acts authentically in regard to her gender. "I really am the girliest, girly girl there ever was". She commented.

Annie behaves in an authentic manner despite others stereotyping her. She referred to her vegetarianism, the perception of her as being a feminist because it is known she studied feminist theory at university, and her presented physical image, hair in an irregular style and looking physically strong, as being characteristics that others have responded to stereotypically in their view of her. Owning and running a vegetarian café might also seem to be apart from traditional norms. She comments:

So I'm still stereotyped as a vegetarian, feminist, somebody who might look like a lesbian, which is something I've have had to contend with for the past fifteen or twenty years. I'm not a feminist, but I'm interested in things other women are interested in, such as feminist literature, but it doesn't make me a feminist. I don't eat meat but I don't feel like a vegetarian. I don't want to be that label thing and I'm definitely not a lesbian, though I have been with women. I don't like being put in boxes.

Annie refuses to accept being labelled and her subversion to categorisation is through a manifested authenticity. She does not deny her femininity but lives it in her own intuitive

manner. Annie feels that some women play roles contrary to their true nature and in so doing they restrict themselves from behaving authentically.

Annie feels that lived authenticity is also important for its effect on others. She is critical of the roles she observes people often seem to conform in playing, and believes that their lack of genuineness can have an effect on their personal perceptions of happiness:

In a nutshell, people need to appear to be something rather than really be it.  
Whereas if they had a chance to really be what they wanted they'd really be quite content and then all the people around them would be quite content too.

**Resource characteristics: “It’s the act of putting that much into something”.**

Annie demonstrates a number of prevailing personality characteristics, utilised as personal resources, throughout her narrative. These characteristics are prominent in her responses to dominant themes of lived agelessness, lifelong learning, through experiences in relation to change and overcoming adversity, and overall in her construction of identity.

Embedded within Annie’s story is a striving to be involved in experiencing life, to not be an observer, demonstrating her passion, commitment and determination to do work she believes in. Annie regards involvement as “...crucial, absolutely crucial to the way I feel about myself and my life. I want to be involved”. In the café she tries to be excellent at what she does, and this reveals itself as a determination to make high-quality coffee:

We very rarely nail it and come close to that feeling of accomplishment. It can be something as simple as a coffee, and that doesn’t in any way belittle it, because it’s the act. It’s the act of putting that much into something.

Annie enacts her view of positive thinking as a strategy for events in her life. Foremost in this optimistic approach is her choice of perspective from which to view the events of her

life, especially those involving difficulties. It has assisted her to be clear about priorities, especially in relation to a partner and to her children, and in attitude to try to enjoy life and be trusting of others. She comments, "I make an active choice not to worry". Annie chooses to primarily enjoy her life. Being happy in all contexts of her life is important to her and includes taking pleasure in the work she does, for example, she is glad to be at work. A notable influence on her choosing to focus on enjoyment was witnessing the difficulties of life in Asian countries:

I am going to do my very best to enjoy every day. I think that is very, very important to me. I couldn't stand to sit here whingeing about not being able to enjoy my life for whatever reason when there are people in the world who can't get something to eat or drink or to wash themselves.

Also Annie feels lucky that she has the opportunities for life choices of enjoyment that she has: "Other people in the world don't have the same kind of ability to play. I know how lucky I am to have been born into this kind of society".

A noticeable part of her involvement is her demonstration of communication skills individually and across age ranges. The "immediacy of the individual" is the term she uses for the contact with customers entering the café, bringing an interaction between their feelings of that moment together with her feelings. "I'm learning what they want to show me and I'm learning about them, which I find extremely interesting. On a daily basis what I'm learning is about human nature". She mainly learns from listening to people though she also comments, "To talk and put it into your own words clearly is when it crystallises". Annie is accepting of allowing others to be themselves. She responds with what I see as respect in not trying to change the people involved but choosing instead to listen. She feels her acceptance is based also on trusting of the differences in others: "There is a fine line between having a sparkle in your eye and being a bit demented".



Interactions are not restricted to her age group or to a younger or older one, as she mixes easily with people of different ages. Throughout her narrative her lived experiences regarding inter-generational interactions were not governed by age, and it was noticeable that no descriptive labelling relative to any age was made. For example, her comments reveal that her language adjusts to continuing colloquial changes. Terms of modern usage that appear in her speech include 'vaguing-off' as not concentrating, being 'stoked' for being very pleased, being 'crap' for not being good at something, discussing an attractive girl dressed in contemporary clothes as an 'awesome ravee chick', and being 'blown out' by an idea. This use of terms in a more current vernacular are indicative of the adaptability to change Annie refers to throughout her narrative.

Self-reflection is important to Annie. Apart from her earlier discussed mention of the importance to her of subconscious thoughts, her reaction to the interviews themselves provided an illustration of her reflective nature: "Honestly, in talking to you it's made me think a little bit more about the future. It's given me even more confidence that it's all going to be o.k." She commented further on the helpful nature of her involvement in the study, at the end of Interview Three:

I know that I will go home and feel really positive about the whole experience, that it's been a really good thing for me to do. I was a little hesitant at first about having to talk about myself, but it has been a good positive experience for me.

Annie displays risk-taking characteristics. She has recently acted in a successful play, her first and she says, only role, a new learning experience for her. Also, learning mixing as a DJ has resulted in her being offered a public performance that she will accept. A further example is the risks taken in creating the first flourishing vegetarian restaurant in the locality, and in aspects such as the décor of the environment and the menu restriction. Nevertheless, she views her risk-taking as small in comparison with people who change structural aspects of society.

Throughout what I see as adversities in her life, and at other times, Annie has demonstrated giving and caring. In the café she is conscious of the opportunity to give by creating time to listen to her customers. In making a coffee she is mindful of the response of the drinker, “I see someone drinking it and they’re going, “Great coffee”. I reply, “I made it for you and I hope you like it”, and that’s what is important to me”. In a further illustration, compassion is shown to people walking past from the near-by men’s Hostel and also to some people on day release from receiving psychological treatment at the local hospital. Upon calling in to the café, they often receive a cup of tea or a glass of water and as Annie comments, “I listen to their stories and then they go”.

Annie’s self-construction as a change agent for others is achieved through providing support. While being concerned to make a difference, Annie intuitively chooses to make her changes at a personal rather than political level: “Maybe, you come in [to her café] feeling shit and you go out feeling better. That’s the only change I really ever want to effect on people in my life, because I know it’s real, and I know for the moment something did happen”. She utilises her strengths of communication through giving of herself in terms of time, by listening and showing compassion, as well as modelling the values she believes in, such as commitment and passionate involvement:

People ask me for advice often, very often. I don’t feel like I’ve got any great skills as a counsellor. I just try to think, try to draw on my experience of the world and honestly answer their questions. It’s as simple as that. If they didn’t think that I understand them and where they are at in their life they would never ask me.

**Reflections: “What is most important to me about becoming ageless is that you are able to be malleable. You can still change no matter how old you are.”**

Annie resists age-related restrictions. It is striking that she refuses to accept stereotypes of age, and commented on the restrictiveness of age perceptions, such as in risk taking or in societal expectations of retirees. She believes people are more likely to resist outside influences due to expectations related to their age if they have more understanding of

themselves. Categorisation based on physical qualities or on expectations, such as societal views on maturity, was also felt to be restrictive.

When I asked her if agelessness behaviour affected her happiness generally, she replied:

I think it makes me much happier, I know it does. It's taken me a while to get here. I've made some choices to get to this point in my life. In some ways I'm the happiest I've ever been, and for a long period of time. I'm happy with where I am.

The epiphanous experience "the world will go on without me" further strengthened her beliefs in a spiritual dimension, and confirmed concepts of age as being irrelevant to her. Through seeing her path as being endless, no matter the erratic directions that she has felt she has travelled up to this point, she feels a freedom to live unrestricted by age through not being afraid of death. She also feels strongly that social control in the form of stereotyping in age is restrictive to personal freedom. While Annie's narrative is not restricted by age, she does have frequent communication with people of different ages and is aware of how others treat age; nevertheless, she refuses to give in to the pressures put upon her to conform to age stereotypes.

Annie constructs herself as her own change agent. There is a sense of movement on the path of Annie's narrative that emerges through her striving to better deal with changes. Initially the changes are brought about by what I view as epiphanies in her life. Annie refers to the importance of the way change is handled: "I think the ability to deal with change is really the mark of somebody". I interpret her "somebody" statement as not being directed at others, but at herself. In my mind, there is a prevailing personal interest in her emphasis on how she deals with the personal change discussed throughout her narrative, and this is significant in the way she regards herself.

The major changes in her life have been strongly influenced by her response to epiphanies. The two major parts of her life are polarised by the epiphany she gives most attention to in the interviews, the death of her mother. The second epiphany, her

realisation that “being by myself is enough”, has affected her perception of her independence. Other discussed epiphanies have shaped the dominant themes we keep returning to throughout her narrative, including dealing with change from adversity, openness to lifelong learning and learning about herself, non-conforming to age stereotypes, and the re-crafting of her identity.

Her mother’s death was not only the marker between the “wonderful glory time” of her childhood and the adult chapter of “consolidation” encompassing her life since then, but had other effects as well. A notable influence was her response to discovering the extent to which her mother had not disclosed herself, especially in areas such as drug taking. I pondered on whether Annie’s sense of profound disappointment in her mother’s concealment was due to feeling let down by a significant person in her life. Annie has since emphasised behaving in a genuine manner, being ‘up front’ in all declared aspects of her life. Consequently, she tries to provide an authentic commitment to living her own life, in particular with regard to her children, but also in other areas of her life such as her business interests. To my mind it is ironic that a long-lasting major influence from her mother came not as a result of the remembered loving interactions, but as a response to the difficulties associated with her death.

While her childhood was regarded as “a wonderful glory time”, in retrospect it was a narrative of imagination. Her memory of that time, even in photographs, has a sense of unreality. In particular, with heightened awareness and understanding of the factors influencing that time, she feels that she was unable to be assertive due to the significant adults, with wealth and power, having control in her life: “I felt engulfed by everything around me”. I interpret “engulfed” to be a key word in Annie’s narrative of her childhood. A crucial area for Annie is in locus of control, in particular in trying to have significant input into the changes in her life that occur “...without a comet hitting me”. The word engulfment within the described context of her childhood means a sense of being trapped, overwhelmed and essentially out of control. Nevertheless, while some changes in life are out of her control, others within her control can be directed.

This sense of engulfment is strongly opposed to her view of learning. When I asked her which word she would most associate with learning she replied, “openness”. She further explains, “I think an important part of lifelong learning is to be open to experiences, to be open to how you are actually feeling when something happens to you. I think that’s really important, not to temper it”.

For Annie, however, no matter whether there is a sense of control or not, it is the way that change is dealt with that is important. Annie takes opportunities from life experiences to learn about herself and others. The way she learns from changes in her life is by positive self-talk at the time of the occurrence, and moreover, as a salient part of lifelong learning and as Annie regards controlling emotions as limiting to what we can learn from the experience, by utilising an authentic emotional response.

There are internal inconsistencies noticeable in Annie’s narrative. As previously mentioned, her belief in openness might be viewed as being in contrast to the attempt to control areas of her life. On the one hand, she constructs herself as being open to learning from change, while simultaneously desiring control of the changes. “I want to be the one who determines”. There is a sense of driving herself, retaining control of changes whenever possible, almost as though there is a fear of being at a standstill. Perhaps she senses that in stopping on her path, engulfment might occur, causing openness to learning to be restricted. She discussed her conscious avoidance of reverting to old patterns. Additionally, having commented on the importance of experiencing situations, her internal repeated talk of “This will soon be over” might be viewed as an attempt to distance herself from the experience. This suggests the need for some control of the emotional authentic nature of her response to change.

Locus of control is a self-constructed pivotal site for Annie. There are a number of examples that demonstrate her desire to have control of some changes in her life. She has taken responsibility for elements of her own life, including the life style she has chosen. This enables her to live, to her mind, more genuinely, with less conflicts arising from her choices. Furthermore, she often chooses learning that is interesting to her. Experiences in

formal and informal learning since post-compulsory age have been selected due to their intrinsic interest to her, a process she feels will be lifelong, though informal learning in particular has a fundamental part to play in her ongoing learning.

Annie feels that learning from adversity has made her more resilient. In turn she sees her increasing resilience as supporting her emotional independence so that, “I got there by myself... I have the ability to be able to stand up for what I really want from this life”. Annie chooses to view the adversity in a positive way, learning from the experience and striving for her lived experiences to be authentic.

Nevertheless, she does acknowledge feeling powerless in regard to global problems. She commented, “There are so many many helpless people. I can’t change that. When I was younger I felt I could contribute something, and now I know I can’t do almost anything to change that”.

In particular, her response to change does not rely on chronological age, but can be assisted by accrual of learning brought about by progress through changes. As she comments, “...it’s not the actual age that matters but the accumulation of experiences”. In effect, age is irrelevant in her response to the experience.

I view epiphanies in Annie’s life as being “comets” that have hit her. Annie emphasises learning about herself from experiences in life and developing resilience through her managing of difficulties. Self-determination of individual identity is enabled by responding in a way she views as authentic. A lived authenticity allows her to be non-conforming if she so chooses, “...not caring if you look like a fool or not when you do something”. It is also important to note that in her narrative, her authentic response is applied in different contexts and is not influenced by individual or communal expectations.

Annie's empowerment to act authentically and to respond positively to adversity is a representation of the regeneration of her identity since her childhood, "I've regenerated so many times since then and now". She further comments:

We're all searching for a fixed point of identity. Well I don't think I am. I don't think I am seeking a fixed point of gender or identity. I'm happy to be able to change and I've changed a lot in the last year, I've changed more than I ever thought I'd change. I changed a lot the year before as well. I had to contend with things I never thought I would have to contend with, and I hope to change again next year. All the time that I'm changing what I'm becoming doesn't necessarily need to be more me. It's just another part of me. I'm becoming something else that is within me that might stay forever or might not. What is most important to me about becoming ageless is that you are able to be malleable. You can still change no matter how old you are.

## 5.5 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

### 5.5.1 Introduction

Discussion of the narratives from the three case studies follows. A consideration of key variables of the study, being agelessness, lifelong learning and social wellbeing, is made in terms of the presented lives of the participants. The narratives of Auntie, Trinh and Annie reveal how a range of diverse experiences are reflected upon individually and interpreted in the ongoing creation and confirmation of their identities.

The cross-case analysis, as described in Chapter Three, utilises narrative methods and grounded theory to "...look for answers to questions such as how come, where, when, how, and with what results, and in so doing uncover relationships within categories" (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p.127). Emphasis is given to deeper, non-literal elements as discussed by Lather's text reading variations of meaningfulness and significance (1995 in Kvale 1996). Code notes and memos (Strauss and Corbin 1998) assisted axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) as discussed earlier, to explore and develop property categories, and a depth of category understanding.

It is posited that the subjects are agents of change in their own and others' lives. The inevitability of change is accepted and responded to by the case study subjects in terms of what is within their locus of control and what is not. Salient influences on the shaping of identity, such as self-understanding emphasised through lived authenticity, and self-reflection from notable memories, are utilised as a basis for change.

A range of characteristics of agelessness emerged from the case studies. These lived personality characteristics are regarded as identity resources for use in promoting or responding to changes within or outside of an individual's perceived locus of control. The concept of identity resources is adapted from Falk and Kilpatrick's (2000, p.101) "cognitive and affective attributes", such as self-confidence and trust, which can be utilised in interactions with others. Identity resources are personality characteristics



accessible for use, whereas tenets are the underlying principles for a belief system. Although Falk and Kilpatrick's original concept of identity resources related to mutual benefit, for the purpose of this study the definition is adapted to individuals.

A key attribute underlying agelessness is that the subjects' identity includes seeing themselves as having qualities that have become potential resources. Characteristics demonstrated by the subjects in response to life experiences are viewed as identity resources (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000). In this study, identity resources are personality characteristics utilised as personal resources and influenced by, understood through, and played out in response to, an experience. Identity resources are prevailing characteristics that an individual can derive and utilise. For example, utilisation of positive thinking, and acceptance of others are identity resources.

The role of adversity in the development of identity resources is also discussed, with epiphanies playing an important role in the storied narratives under discussion. The subjects demonstrate a style of living enabling authentic demonstration of identity resources in response to changes in their lives. Nevertheless, the omissions and internal inconsistencies in their narratives demonstrate the diversity and ongoing individual crafting of their identities. A balance between learning from the past, appreciation of living in the present, and a sense of future is also observable.

In the constant process of reconstruction of identities, the subjects demonstrate their response to change. Lifelong learning is demonstrated strongly within the narratives, with the subjects perceived as vibrant lifelong learners and part of self-created learning communities. The subjects' perceptions on ageing in response to change are notable. All three subjects act in a way unrelated to age and have a range of attitudes towards age that are not restrictive.

Dominant themes from the three case studies presented are described in turn. Shaping identity through change and adversity and agelessness characteristics as identity resources, including the emergence of veiled qualities, are posited as dominant themes

additional to the focus on agelessness and lifelong learning. Furthermore, while findings from the case studies suggest that agelessness can be understood further in terms of personal characteristics, how the subjects utilise characteristics, viewed here as identity resources, within varied situated contexts in response to change in their lives is considered. Underlying tenets of beliefs, attitudes, and values in response to life experiences, within a personal and societal context, are examined as the basis for response to change in life. Such tenets are learnt through life experiences and include aspects such as a humanistic value system, the influence of culture and social wellbeing aspects of health and meaningfulness.

### **5.5.2 Dominant theme: Shaping identity – Interaction of change, identity and the role of adversity**

A dominant theme throughout the life history narratives is the subjects' views of how they responded to change. The responses of the subjects to change demonstrated how they shaped and consolidated their identities of agelessness and their attributes as lifelong learners. As discussed in Chapter Two, change is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. The influences of people through their social actions (Tenant and Pogson 1995) build to historical events and lead to global and societal changes. Changes in information technology (Field 2000), in vocational mobility (Candy et al 1994, Field 2000, Cornford 2002, Edwards et al 2002), and in flexibility of life course transitions (Neugarten 1972, Neugarten and Neugarten 1987, Settersten and Hagestad 1996a) have lead to "Insecurity, uncertainty, unpredictability and exclusion" according to Edwards et al (2002, p.525), endorsing the nature of change as an intrinsic part of life.

In responding to change, the subjects' construction of knowledge about themselves from ongoing self-understanding assisted in further reflection on events in their lives. Heinz (in Weymann and Heinz 1996, p.50) discusses Kohli's view that "...social changes that characterize modern societies demand more biographical self-reflection and flexible coping strategies by the individuals". The importance of self-reflection was discussed

earlier in regard to transformational learning (Mezirow 2000), and the subjects' narratives also affirm Seligman's (1994) view regarding our capacity to change ourselves.

A crucial aspect in the changes the subjects have made in their lives relates to the events they feel they had control over and those that they did not control. The perception of self-responsibility was noticeable in Auntie's reflection, "I'm game for each year in my life. In my own way", and Annie's desire to control changes in her life when she declared, "I want to be the one who determines". Nevertheless, there is an acceptance and awareness that there are some events in life over which it is not possible to have control, with Annie commenting, "I know I can't determine everything".

The subjects' re-definition of themselves is particularly noticeable in their response to remembered events in their lives. In the interviews, the subjects discussed the same event in their lives at different times in different ways, or perceived a past event differently from how they admitted they knew it had actually happened. Examples include Annie's stated lack of recall in regard to childhood photographs and Trinh's memories of his father's death. In effect, the representation of an event may not be factually accurate. Furthermore, a perception of the circumstances of an event could be different to others', as in Auntie's remembrance of the warmth of human interactions and communal sharing in her childhood. This is in contrast to Burbury's (1929 as cited in Ryan 1996, p.245) comment, "How they live is a mystery". As Barone (2001, p.165) maintains, the memory "serves the self in its own construction"; however, perceived remembrance would appear to discount the necessity for confirming specific accuracy, as it is the perceived memory that is of importance. The remembered perception demonstrates movement through the past towards the present (Polkinghorne 1988), by emphasising that what is recalled is constructively representative of the memory (Tierney 2000), and a coherent part of the story told (Richardson 1997). As Polkinghorne (1988, p.120) concludes, "Human beings are not simply constructions based on past events; they are also products of narrative structures. They exist in narrative creations and are powerfully affected by them".

I view the re-creation of the subjects' identities (Tierney 2000) as a recurring dominant theme in the narratives. Annie refers to becoming "the sum total of the things that have happened to me", affirming Holstein and Gubrium's (2000, p.95) "...self construction in the context of going concerns". The identities of the subjects can also be viewed as being multi-faceted. Their identities have been crafted in different ways through their own experiences and their distinctive response to those experiences. In effect, complexities of their identities are displayed through the participants' responses to particular events in their lives, in accordance with Richardson's (1997) view of crystallisation.

I have found by examining the data that the subjects reflected on their past and present life experiences and the effect these occurrences have had on the way they have changed in their lives. They could be argued to have redefined their identities, in terms of their ways of presenting themselves in everyday life, through a perceived memory of the events experienced. As Munro (1998, p.86) stresses, "...we are continually re-writing our pasts as a way to make sense of the present". In the interviews, the subjects often strived to make personal sense out of the replies they gave, recalling Cortazzi's (1993) conception of multiple voices acting interchangeably on the past, present and future, in ongoing identity redefinition.

Embedded in the narratives of Trinh, Auntie and Annie are their efforts in self-constructing their identities through their understanding of the distinctions between themselves and others through the collective interactions of their lives. This negotiation of identity could be perceived in Auntie's visits to the old people on the island, visits that I see as influential in her later involvement in the Aboriginal community. Wenger (1998, p.157) discusses generational encounters as being transformative in identity. He submits that, "If learning in practice is negotiating an identity, and if that identity incorporates the past and the future, then it is in each other that old-timers and newcomers find their experience of history".

I view learning in the narratives as being influential on identity. Wenger (1998 p.215) asserts, "Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience

of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming". For the subjects, learning more about themselves can be viewed as a means of re-creating identity in terms of Barone's (2001, p.165) declaration that "The organism strives for coherence". For example, Annie sees herself now as continuing to negotiate a coherent identity that constantly regenerates through the changes in her life and what she has learned from those changes. An illustration of this occurring was her acknowledgment that her initial view of her childhood lacked salient aspects of genuineness.

In this study the identities of the subjects, as portrayed to the researcher, have been crafted within the course of the life histories. As Kondo asserts (1990, p.48), "...identity is not a static *object*, but a creative *process*; hence creating selves is an ongoing – indeed a lifelong – occupation". Andrews (1999) discusses the dichotomy between 'you're only as old as you feel' and 'you're only as old as you are' and maintains there is an interface between these positions. However, for the subjects in this study, while their response to change was critical to the way they lived their lives, their age or the extent of being old was not expressed as being salient to transformation, except by physical restrictions, as mentioned by Trinh and Auntie. Accumulated life experiences rather than chronological years of living can be viewed as influential to their individual identities.

The subjects regarded attitude and response to change as being more significant than the events themselves. What is particularly noticeable in the narratives, whether initiating or responding to change, is the subjects' view of qualities in themselves and how those qualities are displayed. For example, with Trinh his metaphor of rocks in the stream concentrates on the way the rocks are negotiated rather than the adversitorial difficulties the rocks caused in his life. In his comments about his life during the Vietnam War, descriptions of any extreme difficulties or hardships are not mentioned in detail, apart from his reference to an "uncertain world"; however, he does relate the benefits of changes in location by assisting human interaction, and how he visualised his future life from receiving a post card. In effect, Trinh emphasises the re-creation of his identity through the catalyst of what I view as adversity.

While participants tended to view life difficulties in a positive manner, they did accept that these were difficult times that had been overcome. Auntie relates, “I’ve never got down Paul, I’ve never let myself get down”. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges, “what I’ve been through in the last eight years, previous to that is rearing the family, all those state children, going out into the community and working”. Thanh affirms his understanding that there were adversities in his life, “I somehow feel that with the childhood background of the war, the village environment, the human relationships, somehow I got in me a very unique Thanh”. Annie relates, “I got there by myself... I have the ability to be able to stand up for what I really want from this life”.

It is important that I emphasise that the subjects did not necessarily regard events that I viewed as adversity in the same way. For Auntie, the life circumstances of her childhood on the island were perceived differently and in a way that is strongly opposed to Burbury (1929 as cited in Ryan 1996), as mentioned earlier. Burbury describes an attitude of bitterness and hostility with over 200 to 250 people in 24 dwellings. Auntie instead described the pervading attitude as being one of warmth of human interaction with a display of important human affective values, enabling her actions in learning from the old people as her “professors”.

For Annie, the death of her mother, which she regarded as an adversity, was responded to in actions and attitudes focused on revising life priorities. Her use of the term “double-edged sword” symbolically demonstrated both an initial defence of self at a time of vulnerability, and a way forward through reflection and eventually consolidation. Her response to adversity in her narrative is through positive self-talk, authentic emotional response to the experience, and visualising a positive outcome. It is noticeable in the interviews with Thanh and Auntie that positive thinking and authentic actions were adversitorial responses for them also, as noticeable in the “uncertain world” occasion and the “I cried all the time” anthropological examination respectively.

The subjects' self-representational acts did not assign responsibility for what occurred in their lives to others, but accepted responsibility for their own attitudes and actions. In confronting and overcoming adversity in their lives, the subjects all emphasised visualising a positive outcome from the difficult situation faced. Furthermore, all acted on the difficulty in a manner that would lead them to learn from the experience, with self-reflection and self-understanding foremost in their actions.

Positive approaches to adversity were perceived by the subjects to lead to improvements in their quality of life. An optimistic approach to change that draws upon personal resources, such as those linked to positive thinking, self-talk, persistence and determination, was viewed by them to lead to beneficial outcomes. Thanh felt that his self-concept was instrumental in his response to the rocks of adversity by embracing change, while both Annie and Auntie demonstrated confidence in resisting the perceptions of others through the filter of a positive attitude towards what change could bring.

The subjects regarded adversity as an opportunity. Frankl (1963), in describing the circumstances of adversity in a concentration camp, referred to the necessity to "force the mind" (p.115). The complexities of Frankl's responses to difficulties enable us to view not only the role of adversity in our lives but the attitudinal influences assisting outcomes. Frankl (1963), in circumstances of great difficulty, suggested that for most inmates there was an acceptance of lack of hope and in his view, consequently, an opportunity passed. By thinking of the future with a positive perspective, he viewed his circumstances differently from many others by choosing to regard them as being those of opportunity and challenge. Mezirow (2000) discusses how adults undergo transformative learning when faced with crisis or adversity. The transformation occurs through the creation of a new cognitive construction in response to the disorientating dilemma, in essence, re-mapping thinking. The crisis or adversity has the effect of forcing the respondent out of a 'comfort zone'. Thanh's story indicates this view of responding to adversity in his stating firmly, "That's life. You're tested".

However, there was not a close correlation between all of the characteristics of resilience as listed by Greene and Conrad (2002) and those displayed within the narratives. The area of resilience focuses upon individual adaptation to adversitorial change, with an individual enabled to “bounce back” (Benard 1991) from adversity and assist themselves in regaining autonomy. Furthermore, Garmezy (1991, p.459) confirms that resilience “...reflect[s] the capacity for recovery”. However, characteristics such as good intellectual ability, achievement orientation with high expectations, and higher rate of engagement in productive activities were not identified clearly in this study. Other characteristics such as high self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem, and resilient belief systems were more noticeable, as were some key characteristics mentioned by Benard (1991). Consequently, the responses of the subjects to adversity demonstrated significant differences to resilience concepts.

Visualisation of positive progressions in life occurred for the subjects through metaphors, with metaphoric views – road, path, stream – of journeying through life. The importance of metaphors in envisioning the ageing process was discussed in Chapter Two, with reference to Kaufman’s (1986) view of ageing as an adventure, Gibson’s (2000) projected journey through unknown territory with an unknown end, and Sontag’s (1972, p.72) description of advanced age as a shipwreck. In terms of Ruth and Oberg’s (1996) linkage between the metaphoric perceptions of a life and self-efficacy in living that life, the metaphors utilised by the subjects would appear to demonstrate their perception of life as a durable inner journey. Auntie regarded life as a long road being travelled along, while for Trinh, as discussed earlier, life was a stream with the adversities as rocks to be negotiated. Annie viewed her journey in life as travelling a meandering path. She described this as a path that winds “A little bit forward, a little bit sideways, a tiny bit backwards, a bit over to the right” and is ultimately forwardly directional. Furthermore, her view of a path is one that may intersect with other paths, or may be travelled part of the way with someone else, but it is still your personal path. Annie also discussed the dangers on the journey as being responded to by the further metaphor of a two edged sword, as discussed earlier.



The three case study participants regarded turning points/epiphanies in differing ways. Annie clearly relates events that would fall within the Denzin (2001) definition of an epiphany, without specifically identifying these events as epiphanies/turning points. As a result, the researcher clearly establishes that the study classification of turning point/epiphany is not that of Annie.

For example:

Annie's life has been strongly influenced by the change initiated by what I see as two major epiphanies. One might be described as "a comet hitting me", an event outside of her control, and the other was a moment of self-realisation. After what she terms a "beautiful childhood," what I view as the adversity brought about by the sudden death of her mother raised important questions as to the meaning she placed on her life, with the consequence of her choosing to re-evaluate priorities of her life course. The second major epiphany occurred on the morning of commencement of the new millennium with a sudden realisation that, "being by myself is enough", a moment of self-acceptance that has had an ongoing impact on her emotional independence.

Similarly for Tranh the researcher has identified turning points/epiphanies:

I view the receiving of the post card as an epiphany for Tranh. Although the postcard's arrival did not immediately appear to have such long-term importance, he was able to perceive the possibility of a life away from his homeland. Tranh commented to me on his realisation from looking at the postcard that, "...the horizon is further than my immediate consequences". For a boy enmeshed in a life becoming ever more influenced by the war, the scene printed on the card must have appeared an escape of the imagination, providing a mental image of the potential of a different, more peaceful and secure life. In effect, the postcard provided an important catalytic element in his growing realisation of the possibility of a change to the everyday rigours of life in a war-torn country.

Many epiphanies of the subjects involved adversity, and they occurred most often outside the control of the individual. Epiphanies are keystones of the existential ethnographic interpretive approach (Denzin 2001). Denzin (2001) regards epiphanies to be crucial to meaning-making in a life and that they are identified through "...transformational experiences... In these moments, personal character is manifested and made apparent" (p.34). Character, by this view, is revealed and could be viewed as being developed through response to epiphanies.

Throughout the narratives, the subjects described what I view as a number of epiphanies. Many of these life-changing moments, though not all, can be deemed to involve adversity. Only Annie viewed epiphanies as important on a conscious level but it was clear, in my view, they had often been powerful and traumatic in the lives of all the subjects, as discussed earlier. For example, the subjects all related a parent dying as being significant in their lives. Similarly, as discussed in the narratives, epiphanies were important in influencing the subjects' attitudes and responses to ageing and to learning.

To summarise, an openness to learning about themselves, unrelated to age restrictions, from the lived experience, and a constant re-negotiation of identity were noticeable in the narratives. The subjects' attitudes and actions in response to change and adversity emerged from, and constantly re-occurred in, their narratives. Epiphanies can be regarded as catalytic to potential change. Often, the initial response to change was by authentic emotional response, followed by actions based on positive thinking. It is posited here that, for the subjects, identity resources (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000) were manifested, particularly through adversity, and especially as the result of epiphanies.

### **5.5.3 Dominant theme: Agelessness characteristics as identity resources**

Agelessness characteristics embedded within the narratives can be regarded as identity resources (adapted from Falk and Kilpatrick 2000). All subjects have developed identity resources consisting of observable and hidden or veiled qualities. The observable agelessness characteristics are the TAGs developed in Phase One and endorsed in Phase

Two. I decided to utilise these as a basis of comparison prior to consideration of other emergent characteristics. The TAG identity resources were change, involved, physical appearance, affirmative mind-set, attitudes to age, and effective inter-generational communicator was added as an additional observable TAG as a result of the narrative analysis.

Other agelessness characteristics, named as veiled qualities, emerged from the narratives, but were not necessarily outwardly observable in behaviour. The veiled qualities identity resources that emerged in the narratives were authenticity in action, being a self-reflective learner, altruistic, having a developed spiritual ideology, accepting of others, and self-belief.

Accordingly, identity resources are not all necessarily observable in the behaviour of an individual. Furthermore, they are based on underlying tenets of beliefs, attitudes and characteristics, and are personal reserves developed in advance of change including possible later adversity. Identity resources exist in relation to one another. For example, authenticity is enacted through self-esteem and often by effective communication skills. Furthermore, identity resources appear to be built upon as they are used; the more they are used, the more they would appear to be developed. It is contended that the subjects see themselves as having these identity resource qualities and respond to change and adversity by utilising their identity resources.

### **Observable characteristics (TAGs)**

The subjects can be viewed as demonstrating many of the characteristics of the TAGs. TAGs can be regarded as observable in terms of being noticeable to subjects in Phases One and Two:

- Change: risk-taker, free-thinker, enquiring mind, and non-conformist.
- Involvement: energetic, passionate, a good communicator, and active.

- Physical appearance: physical representation – display of physical characteristics, noticeable physical features and attitude to physical appearance.
- Affirmative mind-set: positive thinker, self-confident and sense of fun/spontaneity, caring, and having a calm manner.
- Attitudes to age: unacknowledged perception of own age, and learns unrestricted by age.
- Effective inter-generational communicator: (Additional TAG). Interacts widely with people of a range of ages.

Change TAG characteristics are clearly referred to by the participants, though the concept of risk-taking has a personal perception as to what entails a risk. For example, not all are confident speakers but their narratives relate that they do speak in public. Also, it is noticeable that the subjects do not display fearfulness or follow old patterns of thought and actions.

The events in the subjects' lives created the site for their re-definition through consolidation and construction of identity, as their own change agents. The subjects' construction of knowledge about themselves is a reflection of their attitude and response to change being viewed as more significant than the events themselves. The subjects emphasised that while change is a necessary part of living, they regard the response as crucial, confirming Fullan's (1993) regard for the importance of response to change. As Annie commented, "I think the ability to deal with change is really the mark of somebody". Their attitude towards change is congruent to acknowledgement of change as a necessary and important part of living, with a flexible response to change noticeable in the narratives, demonstrating an acceptance of the need "to live in a permanent state of adaptation" (King and Schneider 1991, p.355).

I feel that involvement TAG characteristics are conspicuous in the narratives. In illustration, all the subjects are involved within the community in some way. Furthermore, all three appear to be good at what they do but are not trying to be original

for its own sake or to be world-beaters. An example is Annie's trying to make a great coffee: "We very rarely nail it and come close to that feeling of accomplishment... and that doesn't in any way belittle it, because it's the act. It's the act of putting that much into something". Another illustration is Trinh's enthusiasm and involvement in creating opportunities for learners in the teaching and learning subject matter he believes in.

An attitude to physical appearance was discussed in the narratives. In regard to physical appearance, apart from Annie appearing to look younger, physical features weren't clearly addressed by the subjects. However, attitude to physical appearance was undoubtedly noticeable in the narratives in the lack of importance given to the way other people look. Physical appearance was viewed as a personally autonomous choice. Perception of physical appearance in regard to age, being a determination of others, was not a declared concern for the subjects. In terms of self-presentation of physical appearance, Annie mentioned that although being regarded as younger than her actual age she made no attempt in regard to age, and commented "I don't really care".

Affirmative mind-set TAG characteristics were manifested in the narratives. Affirmative mind-set characteristics were strongly emphasised in a number of circumstances as positive thinking, self-confidence, a sense of fun and spontaneity, caring, and a calm manner, though a calm manner was not so clearly addressed. For example, in regard to demonstrating self-confidence Trinh calls himself unique, Auntie called herself different and to Annie, "I am everything already". Furthermore, the subjects' perception of high self-esteem could be viewed as enabling resistance to cultural stereotyping and influences of others. Attitudes to age categories were all unmistakably demonstrated and are discussed in depth within the section focusing on agelessness.

Effective inter-generational communicator is suggested as a further TAG, being an observable agelessness characteristic. Originally, this TAG became noted as part of the attitudes to age TAG as 'interacts widely with range of ages', but it was also prominent in Phase Two and in Phase Three through observations of agelessness demonstrated in communication across a range of ages. The sense of alienation within age strata discussed

by Dychtwald (1999) was not noticeable in the narratives of the subjects, and similarly, contact with an age-related cohort (Biggs 1993) was not apparent. Apart from their discussed memories of the past, the subjects all related the importance of the present and the future in their lives. In terms of Schmotkin's (1991) "Time zones", there was a noticeable emphasis for the subjects on differing everyday concerns in living in the present, as well as discussion of perceived futures, in effect not complying with any age-related grouping.

Examples of inter-generational communication in the narratives included Auntie's contact as a child with the 'old people', and across ages now. Both Annie and Trinh illustrated a range of communication with a variety of people of different ages. Uhlenberg (2000a) maintains that age segregation can affect perceptions and actions in ageing, and in contrast, it could be posited that the inter-generational communication of the subjects was instrumental in agelessness perceptions. It was noticeable that despite utilising different language approaches, for example, Annie with a more modern vernacular, such as "vaguening off", and Trinh with elements of syntactic dissonance, nevertheless, all believe they communicate well with people of different ages.

### **Veiled qualities**

Further identity resources, other than the observable TAGs, revealed themselves within the narratives and were named as veiled qualities. These characteristics were not apparent to the subjects of the descriptive survey in Phase One or the focus groups of Phase Two. It is posited that the particular veiled quality characteristics are only known to those who demonstrate agelessness, and are veiled from the casual observer of the behaviour of others. They are:

- Authenticity in action
- Self-reflective learner
- Altruistic
- Developed spiritual ideology
- Accepting of others

- Self-belief

### *Authenticity in action*

Authenticity of response was linked to a sense of empowerment. Annie referred to the importance in agelessness for her of “being open to my instincts”. Genuineness of actions in response to life events was endorsed by Annie, and could be viewed as an authentic emotional response. Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p.9) refer to “sentiment and emotion, the unadulterated core of human experience”. The death of Annie’s mother, an event I view as a major epiphany in her life, and the subsequent disclosure of concealment in her mother’s life, influenced her decision to try to live by being authentic in her actions.

Having control over life choices was held to be important in being able to respond authentically. Annie commented, “the lifestyle I have chosen for myself enables me to be myself in any given situation”. The subjects regarded authenticity in the situated context of agelessness life actions as crucial. Ironically, Auntie chose to keep her hair grey in order to display genuineness, while Annie chose to dye her hair as a personal choice, and consequently also displayed authenticity. In line with authentic responses to living, the subjects declared that they made no effort to improve or relate their physical appearance to age.

### *Self-reflective learner*

Self-reflection is a pivotal learning site for the subjects. Reflection on past and present experiences was notable throughout the narratives. The self-reflection related to events, issues and concerns in their lives, and the crafting of clearer understandings from life events through this process was perceptible. For example, Annie regarded self-reflection as being valuable in developing priorities in her life. Holstein and Gubrium (2000, p.232) relate that “Just as selves reflectively grow out of the diverse stories we can tell, our own restorying brings us to the junction of everyday accounts and the growing concerns that mediate reflection on those accounts”. In this way the subjects continue to learn more

about themselves, a self-understanding that became important as a basis for responding to new experiences authentically.

Mezirow (1990) emphasises the importance of critical reflection in transformative learning, assisting individuals to take charge of their own learning. Mezirow (2000, p.23-4) refers to an “informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight”. Comments within the narratives, such as Auntie’s “I’ve got to work this one out for myself”, indicate the utilisation of self-understanding as a basis for reflective decision-making. Mezirow (2000, p.11) also refers to “awareness, empathy, and control” in authentic transformational learning, all of which I think are illustrated in the narratives. An illustration of the subjects’ reflective practice occurred as Auntie, Trinh and Annie all reflected on what had been discussed in the interviews. Transformational reflections from the interviews occurred, with Trinh commenting that “It opened the window for me with fresh air coming in and was intimate and revealing for me. A meditation and sharing process for me”.

### *Altruistic*

I view the subjects’ lived altruistic actions as a representation of their authentic demonstration of meaningfulness. Altruism, viewed here as an “unselfish concern for the welfare of others” (Collins New English Dictionary 1997, p.19), was noticeable in the narratives in regard to the meaning made from their lives. Altruism can be viewed as a primary value manifesting in generosity of giving without expectation of return. Greene and Conrad (2002) suggest that altruism can assist demonstration of integrity and development of resilience, while Frankl (1963) maintained that giving to others has a deeper significance and importance, and is vital in the creation of a meaningful life. The subjects could be viewed as change agents for others, particularly in terms of forms of altruism. Trinh overcame difficulties in his early life by emphasising giving to others, and continues in a range of personal and professional actions relating to people in his life. Auntie supports young Aboriginal people in trouble, with time and economic support, and Annie assists people in need who pass her café, as well as making a point of listening



non-judgmentally to her patrons. In effect, the subjects all referred to giving to others in their own different ways as an important part of their identity.

### *Developed spiritual ideology*

The subjects all had a declared spiritual ideology. Although none of the subjects attended a formal religious setting, they had strong spiritual beliefs. As Frankl (1946/1986, p.x in Gerwood 1998, p.673) asserts, "The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored, for it is what makes us human". Although influenced by formal religions, such as Christianity, Taoism or Buddhism, the subjects' spiritual interpretations were individually conceived and different from one another, but nevertheless were important to the way they viewed life.

Valuing life but not being afraid of death may well be influential in a connotation of ageing. Important in the subjects' beliefs were their view of death and by connection life. Life being authentically experienced is central to all the subjects. In valuing life and life experiences, an acceptance of death as an inevitable part of the life cycle is propounded. Kubler-Ross (1975, p.126) asserts, "Facing death means facing the ultimate question of the meaning of life. If we really want to live we must have the courage to recognise that life is ultimately very short, and that everything we do counts. When it is the evening of our life we will hopefully have a chance to look back and say: "It was worthwhile because I have lived". Annie commented, "You cannot have life without death", while Trinh commented on Buddhist spiritual beliefs in respect of age. Perhaps to better understand living it was necessary for the subjects to have an accepting belief ideology related to death.

It appears likely that the subjects' spiritual views were assisted in formation through epiphanies in their lives. For example, Auntie's stroke was a salutary experience for her. For Annie and Auntie, the deaths of their mothers and for Trinh, his father's death similarly were experiences involving spiritual reflection. Experiencing and reflecting on the deaths of people close to them could be viewed as assisting in developing their responses to living and consequently their attitudes toward their own ageing.

*Accepting of others*

A characteristic demonstrated in the subjects' narratives was acceptance of others. Acceptance was noticeable throughout the narratives in the subjects' not suggesting how others should respond to age, learning or in interactions generally. In intergenerational contact, acceptance of others' views and responses was inherent.

A key aspect in the acceptance of others' attitudes and behaviours was in not actively trying to initiate change by force of opinion or influence. Instead, the participants emphasised the provision of opportunities for change from a perceived difficulty in their interactions with others, and often provided support for this to occur. Examples included Auntie's assistance to young Aboriginal people and Trinh's supplying learning opportunities. Furthermore, despite personal difficulties encountered, there was no sense of blame attributed to others for their part in the difficulty, for example, to the anthropologist for his part in the scientific experiments, or to a partner of any of the participants in personal relationship breakdowns. Acceptance was displayed through not attributing blame to others, and choosing instead to re-focus on positive personal outcomes.

*Self-belief*

A high sense of self-esteem was suggested as needed in order to resist expectations or being unduly influenced by the judgment of others. Trinh viewed self-esteem as having being instrumental in his individual autonomous decision-making in dealing with the difficult experiences of his life. Annie referred to resisting unfavourable responses from others to non-conformity of age expectations by "not caring if you look like a fool or not". Auntie commented on how self-esteem was sometimes necessary in resisting unpopular views of others in her Aboriginal community. Responses were different among the subjects with Annie ignoring the unfavourable responses, believing it was not necessary to justify an action and to act "because I can". Auntie chose to avoid the likely

consequences by not declaring her views openly. In both examples, self-belief was necessary to resist acceding to others' expectations.

Identity resources, both observable TAGs and those named as veiled qualities, are personal resources available for response to change; however, underlying tenets provide the basis for utilisation of the characteristics.

#### **5.5.4 Underlying tenets as a basis for decision-making in change**

Underlying tenets are the foundation for decision-making in response to change, and therefore assist the ongoing re-creation of identities that can be seen through the dominant themes in the narratives. Underlying tenets include the influence of culture and development of a value system, as well as the role of social wellbeing in responding to life experiences.

#### **Culture and value systems**

An important underlying tenet for responding to change is the value system of the individual. According to Kaufman (1993, p.18), "Values provide a means of weighing and choosing solutions to everyday problems posed by living in a society and confronting adaptive dilemmas that occur over the life span", while Scott (in Scott et al 1998, p.178) suggests that values provide the transformative orientation towards "a social vision about the future". Underlying value tenets for the subjects in their narratives were displayed in terms of affective human values such as altruism, compassion, and the demonstration of equality through sharing and respect. Examples include Auntie's mother's actions later influencing Auntie to give to people who ask for assistance, despite often having little herself. Similarly, Trinh's recognition of childhood cultural values has continued to influence his later life, while Annie's narrative relates her caring and acceptance of others.

Character development, in terms of the values that are incorporated within our identity, is affected by our cultural experiences. Culture is discussed by Sargent et al (1997) and Krieken et al (2000) as being significantly restrictive to an individual's values, attitudes and behaviours. Sargent et al (1997) maintain that this predisposition results in being culture-bound. For the subjects, the culture of their early childhood was important. To some extent Auntie, in her early years, follows what Barone (2001, p.129) refers to as an inherited cultural script. He states that it "contains a formula for living in accordance with the norms of the prevailing culture. It offers a description of one's identity that is written by others and is thus marked by domination and control". The graphic memories for Auntie as a female in Aboriginal society on the island influenced her direction in life regarding involvement in Aboriginal community issues. For Trinh, the values of Vietnamese culture could similarly be viewed as important to his life. Annie's wonderful childhood also seemed to her to provide many important messages. Furthermore, for Auntie and Trinh the major epiphanies I deem to have occurred in their lives were mainly from their early childhood. Annie's epiphanies also had some linkage with the early period of her life. However, as affirmed by Kaufman (1993, p.18), "Identity is not frozen in a static moment of the past". The past epiphanies influenced the subjects' responses to later events in their lives.

However, while there was clearly a strong influence from those times it would appear that the subjects resisted being culture-bound. Auntie's response to ageing, contrary to Kalish's (1979) new ageism, and to the role of formal learning, could be understood to resist her early cultural background. Similarly, Trinh's comments in regard to understanding and resisting patriarchal gender influences and age-related speech in Vietnam suggest he has responded against being culture-bound from his exposure to another culture. Annie maintains she resisted childhood gender-related influences by self-reflection and understanding, and also mentions that travelling and living in another culture was influential on her in terms of views on materialism and positive thinking. To break free from what in effect is a kind of cultural conditioning can be difficult. Barone (2001, p.130) comments that, "some among us seem capable of avoiding total acquiescence to an inherited script, of achieving an identity with substantial personal

integrity, while not ignoring responsibilities to fellow human beings". The subjects, I feel, demonstrate that they are not culture-bound but culturally influenced, in effect instigating self-change from any early cultural inculcation.

Cortazzi (1993) suggests that cultural variations may affect the way subjects tell their stories. Both Auntie and Trinh have lived away from the direct cultural experience of their childhood for many years, and consequently any influences may be minimised or at least decreased somewhat. Nevertheless, the omissions of personal details, as discussed later, may have reflected on their cultural influences, particularly as, in contrast, Annie described openly aspects of her private life, including personal partner relationships. Auntie's cultural oral tradition background respects elders, and utilising a narrative approach in the study would seem to have considerable congruence with her cultural background.

### **Social wellbeing**

Social wellbeing can be viewed as an underlying tenet providing an important basis for self-responsibility. Embedded in the narratives are beliefs that can be related to Antonovsky's (1987 in Maddox 1991) principal foundations for social wellbeing. Self-presentation of the subjects through the importance of reflection and ongoing learning has been demonstrated as crucial in their narratives, as discussed earlier, and can be viewed in terms of the first principal foundation, "the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves" (Antonovsky 1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11). For example, as mentioned earlier, Trinh, Auntie and Annie on a number of occasions discuss making retrospective meanings and learning from the experiences of their lives.

A second principal foundation, "the attachment of meaning to life that makes pursuit of aging well seem relevant and compelling" (Antonovsky's 1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11), is now considered. Much has been written on a meaning for life. As Mezirow (1990, p.1) advocates, "To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; to make an

interpretation of it". Meaning arising from response to experiences is also referred to by Denzin (2001, p.119) as "The signification, purpose, and consequences of a set of experiences", while Wenger (1998, p.4) regards meaning as "a way of talking about our (changing) ability... to experience our life and the world as meaningful".

The subjects all related a lucid conception of the meaning of their lives through their experiences. For Auntie it related to spiritual beliefs, her notion of Tasmanian Aboriginal traditions, and in actions of giving to others. For Trinh, meaningfulness involved his Buddhist beliefs and in actions to benefit others. Whereas Annie deduced from her experiences a universal sense of "I am it all already", and her interactions with others were suggested as being crucial in her life. Meaning was clearly not related by the subjects as being linked to materialism, physical looks, or status.

The third of Antonovsky's (1987 in Maddox 1991, p.11) principal foundations is "the resources necessary to meet the expectable challenges, even the extraordinary challenges, of life in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways". Health and physical wellbeing were suggested as being a vital resource basis for the ability to make life choices (Rowe and Kahn 1998, Ruchlin and Lachs 1999). However, the subjects had varied involvement in physical activity. Both Auntie and Trinh did not recount consistent exercise in their narratives. Annie, on the other hand, regarded physical activity as being important to the way she feels about herself. Her physical activity mainly consists of work-related activity and dancing in her social life, and she feels these activities are linked to her self-efficacy. She states that, "The way I feel about my physical presence definitely affects my confidence and the way I am in the world", thus affirming McAuley's (1993 in Kelly 1993) view of physical activity assisting self-efficacy. Apart from Annie's mainly vocational physical efforts and Trinh's mention of avoidance of "rubbish McDonalds", other evidence related to health strategies was not presented.

Happiness can be viewed as being part of the underlying tenet of social wellbeing. Happiness was discussed in Chapter Two as being a central part of subjective wellbeing

(Diener et al 1999) and the 'living in the present' dimension of life satisfaction. Diener et al (1999) viewed the happy person as being:

blessed with a positive temperament, tends to look on the bright side of things, and does not ruminate excessively about bad events, and is living in an economically developed society, has social confidants, and possesses adequate resources for making progress toward valued goals" (p.295).

The subjects could be viewed as encompassing a number of the descriptors suggested. For example, Annie consciously chose to develop a positive attitude in an effort to be happy and not "whingeing", after viewing the difficulties of living for people in a different culture to hers. As a result, Annie, in responding to changes, considers whether an outcome will include being happier and more autonomous.

Play as central to wellness (Levy 1978) is also proposed as an underlying tenet of social wellbeing. Levy's (1978) concept of the importance of play in wellbeing is supported by the narratives as being influential to health and the development of individuality. His key elements for wellness, being intrinsic motivation, suspension of reality, and internal locus of control, are particularly noticeable in the narratives. Intrinsic motivation was demonstrated in passionate involvement and self-choice related to informal learning. Suspension of reality was observable in the subjects' responses to having fun and sharing humour, while internal locus of control has been commented upon in detail earlier.

### **The role of situated contexts**

Situated contexts were initially regarded as being of likely importance in agelessness actions. Earlier in this study, discussion was related to elements of situated contexts regarding the situated-style of characteristics used within a particular context. However, in the narratives this did not occur. The subjects were firmly of the opinion that a display of actions in accord with identity necessitated a genuine response; and consequently, that the situated context was not significant in authentic agelessness actions. Actions made

within the workplace, home or the community were regarded in a similar manner, apart from occasional internal inconsistencies commented upon.

Authenticity is a key issue related to use and adaptation of available identity resources in terms of situated contexts. It is suggested here that identity resources, being developed personality characteristics available as resources in response to change and adversity, can be used across situated contexts. Personality characteristics by themselves are dependent on the complexities of interaction with the situated event. In effect, the learning of the subjects across situated contexts is more aligned to the empowerment suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991, p.35) in legitimate peripheral participation “as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent”. Situated contexts in authentic agelessness actions are not, therefore, regarded as necessitating separate responses in different contexts.

#### 5.5.5 Agelessness

It is posited that the subjects demonstrate agelessness in terms of the study definition. Apart from the demonstration of personality characteristics in the narratives, there is more to what has emerged from this phase in regard to agelessness. The subjects’ accounts of their lives display the independent way they have connected their life experiences, by resisting a range of personal and societal interactional and contextual influences related to age. Influences on their attitude to age and ageing were garnered from life events perceived to be both within and outside of their control, as well as from prevailing culture, inter-generational contact and the modelling of others. Limiting beliefs, based on chronological age, can lead to restrictions on the way our lives are conducted. Neugarten and Neugarten (1986, p.40) maintain that, “Some people live in new ways, but continue to think in old ways”; however, for the subjects it might be proposed that they live in new ways and continue to think in new ways.

Auntie, Trinh and Annie’s attitude to age was seen in the way they responded to life changes and was a dominant theme throughout the life history narratives. In the subjects’



accounts of their lives they affirmed a lack of conscious awareness of their chronological age, and importantly, felt that chronological age took no part in the decisions made relating to choosing or responding to life experiences. The subjects commented on not feeling or generally being aware of the age that they were. For example, Auntie felt as though she was thirty to forty years younger than her chronological age and that it was possible to live to one hundred and fifty. She declared, "I'm still a young old age I think". The age the subjects felt themselves to be was generally indeterminate, and was not necessarily related to feeling younger; Annie mentioned that on some days she felt "one hundred".

When asked for their view of agelessness, the subjects emphasised resisting the expectations of individuals and of society generally. An illustration was for Annie to refuse to accept "what I should be doing at a particular age". The subjects explained how they learnt from the experiences of their lives to break with the conformity of expectations of age. In Annie's case, this was demonstrated in her sense of trying to keep people happy in her childhood by fulfilling their expectations, and her later resistance to perceptions of societal age-based expectations. Her view was "to not necessarily cave in to the expectations of our society". An example she gave was that of being allowed to be an eccentric when older in not being influenced by what others think. In a study of eccentrics in a number of countries, Weekes and James (1995, p.26) observed that "Time and again, the eccentrics in our study clearly evinced the shining sense of positivism and buoyant self-confidence that comes from being comfortable in one's own skin". Consequently, being able to be a younger eccentric could be viewed as an expression of resisting expectations of others.

I think that in re-defining their lives, ageing has a synergetic relationship with independence for the subjects. The narratives certainly suggested that locus of control was an important issue in regard to agelessness. Their own ability to choose their response to life experiences, regardless of age, was expounded by all. Furthermore, knowing and understanding themselves was crucial to making choices, and in particular, was a prevailing theme in Annie's narrative. All subjects suggested that self-

responsibility is crucial in making a choice and in constantly deciding to be open to new experiences, an example being Annie's comments on the need to make an "active choice". Auntie suggested that she believed that everybody could take control of their own lives, given a little help and support at critical times. However, the subjects acknowledged a restriction to agelessness from reduced independence due to health difficulties.

The subjects' positive view of age is noticeable in terms of their negative view of particular words regarding ageing. The way that ageing is talked about can provide a perception of the individual's attitude to age. Jolanki et al (2000, p.359) refer to two polarities, a choice or necessity repertoire, based on perceptions of ageing:

Talk about old age as a necessity produces it as a self-evident fact that the essence of old age is deterioration. Talk about old age as a choice is... to argue for various and positive definitions of old age among which one can make a choice... but the ambivalence is rooted in people's minds.

The choice repertoire can be regarded as empowering. The subjects regarded the use of particular terms in respect of ageing as having connotations of labelling, and therefore these could be viewed as being potentially age-restrictive. Examples demonstrating concern for aspects of vocabulary related to age included 'maturity' being suggested by Annie to be "a scary word", while to Trinh it was "derogatory" indicating adherence to area of life "reshuffling of the deck" adjustments (Dychtwald 1999). Also to Trinh age was a "terrible" word. The use of words that may be held to reflect ageist meanings echoes Nuessel's (1982) concerns, and may confirm Emmitt and Pollock's (2000) consideration of the culture being reflected through language usage. The subjects' awareness of age-related word usage would appear to demonstrate their awareness of potential age labelling restrictions, as in Auntie's "young old age" comment. Interestingly, the subjects made no mention of any personal cognitive decline. I suspect that they had not considered this age stereotype, but had responded consistent with the lack of inevitability maintained by Fillit et al (2002). Perhaps their continued

involvement and mental activity could be reflected in terms of the releasing of potential suggested by Baltes and Carstensen (1996) and Nuland (1999).

There was a range of influences on the subjects in regard to the ongoing construction of their attitudes to age. The influence of modelling was referred to by Annie in terms of her grandmother, who in her fifties "...was climbing trees that much faster than I was". Also, Tranh's mother saving to buy a house at ninety-four and his viewing an older stranger driving a bus can be regarded as influencing his view of ageing. Auntie was similarly influenced by her mother's actions. The modelling of non-age-related behaviour was influential to them all and reinforced Bandura (1994) and Minichiello et al's (2000) view of modelling as influential in changing stereotypical age perceptions. For all subjects, it was the modelling by someone of a higher chronological age that had an impact. Tranh was further influenced by his poet philosopher teacher who modelled a resistance to dominant cultural patterning and reflected attributes such as a timeless quality unrelated to age, accepting what occurs outside of our control, and demonstrating a welcoming response to change by not needing to repeat old patterns.

In contrast, both Auntie and Annie referred to their attitude towards age being reinforced by people looking and acting in age-stereotypical manners. The right of others to choose to act in an age-related manner was not denied, but was viewed by the subjects to be restrictive to learning from life experiences. Illustrations of associated behaviour included a lack of risk-taking being mentioned by Annie, with age-stereotypical behaviours such as repeating oneself commented upon by Auntie.

Cultural influences on age were clearly resisted by the subjects. Auntie recounted the age of death on the island of her childhood as being around fifty years of age, and old as "being tottery, not able to think, not able to do anything for themselves". Tranh's clear understanding of Vietnamese cultural influences showed in his comments on his recent visits and the way he was addressed in relative terms of his age. Annie observed different cultural age stereotyping when living overseas, and her comments demonstrated an awareness of resisting cultural stereotypes in Australia. While Sargent et al (1997) refer

to the difficulty of escaping from cultural behaviour and thinking patterning, the subjects would appear, by taking personal responsibility for many facets of their lives, to resist being culture-bound.

The subjects did not appear to follow cultural age norms. In accord with developing flexibility of transitional life events (Settersten and Hagestad 1996a, Peterson 1996), the subjects appeared to be unaware of age norms. Although the subjects all have children, the age of parenthood was varied, and for Trinh there were children mentioned from two different relationships a number of years apart. Retirement wasn't raised as an issue by any of the subjects, reflecting their ongoing involvement, and potentially pre-empting the proposal mentioned earlier by Costello (2004). In effect, the subjects demonstrated "individual status passages" (Heinz 1996), indicating through individual autonomy "Multiple passages over a lifetime journey" (Patton 2002).

Societal events (based on Erben 1998) were influential on two of the subjects. The Vietnam War was clearly influential on Trinh and his seeking of an alternate future. For Auntie, her childhood island influences were also profound. As explained elsewhere, age was noticeable through aspects of modelling or from the effect of societal events in their lives occurring at that time. However, apart from the restrictions of place, more depth of response would be needed to determine the extent of the effect on the subjects.

In terms of theories of ageing related to demonstrated agelessness, the subjects' narratives did not specifically align them to any one theory. However, the subjects appeared to resist categorisation of ageing through life stage and life-cycle theories of ageing such as Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development (1965). For example, despite the subjects being of widely varying ages, seeking meaning and wisdom was important in their lives; consequently, they were not being consistent to any one stage of ageing. The subjects appeared to uphold the "blurring" of life periods suggested by Neugarten and Neugarten (1987, p.33).

Disengagement theory posits that our main aim as we age is to disengage from what has gone before, both in terms of ourselves and from others (Cumming and Henry 1961, Estes 1979, Maddox 1991). In effect, we are to accept ageing as being a period of reconciliation with the past, in acknowledgement of perceived symptoms of decline as ageing advances. Also, as a pre-cursor to eventual death, disengagement theory, according to Rowe and Kahn (1998, p.46), suggests that “The main task of old age is letting go’.

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961, Estes 1979, Maddox 1991), being related to older ages, was clearly not applicable to the responses given by Auntie as the oldest case. Demonstrations of reconciliation with a past and of letting go through acceptance of physical decline were not apparent for her; in contrast, she was perceiving a future with improved physical mobility allowing her to dance a jig. Similarly, gerotranscendence, being Tornstam’s (1999) reconstruction of disengagement theory, and which associates a search for maturation and wisdom with older ages, was also not reflected.

The subjects did, however, display their self-representation through the narratives in terms of several aspects of theories attributed to positive ageing. In particular, facets of continuity theory (Atchley 1993) were related to ongoing identity development and the rejection of the notion of older age as a separate stage in life. The subjects were active in several ways, perhaps most clearly demonstrated by interactions, though pursuing interactional activities was not, I suspect, to maintain continuity (Atchley 1993, Herzog and Marcus 1999), but more likely related to living life in an involved manner.

Facets of activity theory (Havighurst and Albrecht 1953) as a means of active ageing were clearly noticeable in the narratives. Although the theory is usually related to older people, it was apparent in the narrated actions of all three respondents. Clearly also, there is some representation of difference noticeable from the actions of the subjects, though not in the terms of Minichiello et al (2000) regarding the deliberate achievement of difference from others due to the activity. Activities through involvement in life based on

underlying belief tenets are, I suggest, not related to any perception of age but to a perception of a way of living.

In a sense, the mask of ageing theory (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991), by splitting external body appearance from the mind, implies a possible demonstration of inauthenticity. As a means to be authentic, Andrews (1999) suggests the need for a view of ageing incorporating mind and body holistically. The subjects viewed their minds and bodies holistically as part of their identities. While acknowledging physical differences in their bodies through ageing, Auntie and Trinh do not regard their physical bodies as being separate from their minds. Nevertheless, the subjects overwhelmingly regarded mental approaches to concepts of age.

Furthermore, the subjects' aspirations were related to living life fully and not specifically to ageing successfully. Many of the facets of successful ageing, such as theories propounded by Baltes and Baltes (1993) and Rowe and Kahn (1998), are noticeable in the responses of the subjects in their narratives. Common characteristics to Baltes and Baltes' (1993) SOC model can be noted, especially in terms of the use of personal resources such as time or energy to attain goals. However, the implied sense of inevitable decline through re-adjustment of goals inherent in this theory is at variance with the views of the subjects, as also is Kirkwood's (1999, p.11), "the challenge is to reach old age in optimum health and to develop the resources and attitudes to preserve independence and quality of life for as long as possible".

Agelessness, to the subjects, does not have any connotations of age denial, but focuses on accepting and seeking a rich variety of life experiences unrestricted by chronological age. The focus of the subjects was on living and on learning from life experiences and does not appear specifically related to ageing, being more aligned with Biggs' (2002, p.9) suggestion that "There may be something unique that ageing gives us".

### 5.5.6 Lifelong learning

The importance of learning resonates throughout the narratives. The events of their lives create the site for the subjects' representation of themselves as vibrant lifelong learners. The subjects emphasised learning as being crucial to understanding and responding to change in their lives. Areas accentuated in relation to learning were the value of some aspects of formal learning and the importance of informal learning. Furthermore, self-reflection was regarded as critical to self-understanding.

The subjects' construction of knowledge about themselves through learning is a reflection of attitude and response being viewed as more significant than the events themselves. An example is Trinh's rocks in the stream analogy where the flow of life requires awareness and consideration of the emerging rocks. The attitude to learning expressed throughout the narratives could be summarised by Trinh's comment that "learning is living".

This is particularly evident in the subjects' evolving self-representation as learners from the experiences of their life. The subjects regard openness to new experiences as critical to learning. Learning is viewed as being possible from all experiences throughout life – as Annie comments, "I'm learning all the time" – which reflects the study definition for lifelong learning regarding learning as being through experiences from birth to death.

The subjects regard both informal learning and some aspects of formal learning as important. Formal learning is viewed as potentially valuable, though with some reservations. Informal learning, everyday learning from life, was commented on enthusiastically. A contradiction that I initially struggled with was the strength of declared resistance to formal learning, notwithstanding the attendance and acceptance of academic awards by the subjects, though Annie ceased her university course before completion. However, on further reflection, the subjects' response to formal learning was

towards self-direction in learning within formal settings, as emphasised by Candy et al (1994) and Foley (1995). The importance of choice is noticeable in comments related to informal learning. Annie states, "It's personal, you can pick what it is that you are interested in learning about". Tranh believes that children in formal settings learn most from what he regards as the "innocence" of unplanned informal interactions. For Auntie, formal learning through primary school included her remembrance of an occasion where she felt "put down", an event I view as an epiphany stimulating a desire for further learning.

Human interaction by the subjects is regarded as essential to informal learning, echoing the UNESCO Report's (1972/1996a) humanistic view of lifelong learning. Tranh related that, "...every day is always about other people and how I am a part of them and they are a part of me". Tranh also regarded the change from place to place in his earlier life as being important in terms of experiencing contact with different people. Annie similarly emphasised the importance of human interactions in her life and the role they play in learning; while Auntie declares that learning from others is of most influence to her, as reflected by her comment "What makes the world go round, the people in it and the way they act".

I interpreted their interactive involvements in areas of learning as initiating leadership in the establishment of self-created communities of practice. For Annie, this involved a learning community through her everyday involvement in the café, while for Auntie it was particular areas of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, and for Tranh a professional and personal community. As Wenger (1998, p.45) confirms:

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our



enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore to call these kinds of communities *communities of practice*.

In all three case studies the subjects emphasised their involvement with others, and all reflected on the learning that occurs from these interactions. While in one sense the subjects were individualistic in their practice, in another sense their everyday interactions were important to learning.

The subjects commented on several ways that they felt learning could be hindered. Tranh suggested that he learnt little when he was “numb”, in effect not making an active attempt to be involved. For Annie, it was a lack of self-understanding that she regarded as limiting; she suggested that this was often demonstrated in the repetition of old patterns, resulting in an inability to change. The lack of confidence to encounter new experiences by choice was also mentioned, with lack of choice regarded as likely to restrict learning. Tranh discusses wisdom in Vietnamese terms as being a result of age. He expressed a contrary view in regarding wisdom in terms of what is learnt from openness to experiences. Consequently, anything that limits this open response could be restrictive upon learning from life experiences.

Many of the descriptors listed by Kearns (1999), based on Candy et al’s (1994) profile of descriptors for a lifelong learner, could be argued to be displayed within the narratives, and are discussed further in Chapter Six. In consequence of the analysis of the narratives, I consider the subjects to be vibrant lifelong learners living their lives unrestricted by age. The subjects regarded learning as an active, lifelong process to be undertaken in response to life experiences. Learning is related as involving others, but also continuing to reflectively involve themselves. Although the participants emphasised choice of learning experience, learning is suggested as potentially occurring from all life experiences.

### 5.5.7 Internal inconsistencies

Internal inconsistencies are noticeable in the narratives. For Auntie, the role played by formal learning in her story, despite her emphasis on informal learning, can be viewed as contradictory to the valuing and continuation of Aboriginal cultural traditions. For example, the valuing and acceptance of personal academic awards could be perceived negatively in the Aboriginal community. Despite her declared acknowledgment of the importance of informal learning, she advocated the increased involvement in formal education of Aboriginal young people in need. A further contradiction was noted in her believing in authenticity in response to life events, while on the other hand declaring an unwillingness to make some of her views known to Aboriginal elders.

For Annie, an internal inconsistency could be perceived in the seeming contradiction between pivotal sites of openness to learning and her constantly seeking control in regard to new experiences. Her construction of being a person addressing change by authentic emotional response to experiences is also seemingly contradicted by her internally repeated talk of “This will soon be over”. For Trinh, authenticity is a pivotal site in the construction of his identity: however, internal inconsistencies in regard to “playing the game” academically and also in the submission of younger looking photographs would appear to be incongruous.

These internal inconsistencies have been discussed in detail within the narratives; however, it can be posited that the inconsistencies could be related to inner fears. For Auntie, the open declaration of her views on a contentious issue would hazard social isolation from her community, especially as the community would appear to be an inherent and meaningful part of her life. For Annie, the tension in her openness-control dimensions are seemingly not being addressed and might relate to a perceived stagnation if there were a lack of movement in her life. Vocational security fears based on childhood insecurities might be apparent for Trinh, though as a lecturer with tenure, the reality of that fear could be doubted.

Perhaps the internal inconsistencies cannot be surmised and analysed in such a logical manner. A more likely conclusion is that the life of each individual consists of rich and complex diversity – perhaps as highlighted by internal inconsistencies. While understanding of models and patterns of living can be valuably explored, it is nevertheless important to recognise the individual nature of a life lived. For example, I feel Trinh's life to be stable and structured at present, Annie's changeable, and Auntie's energised to fight illness and continue to be involved in what is important to her. No one life follows totally predictable patterns. This is not to negate inconsistencies, but adds to a realisation that other, often unidentified, dimensions of human experiences, such as social contextual or historical environmental influences, can have an effect upon inconsistencies.

Similarly, omissions were perceived in the narratives. Both Trinh and Auntie omitted or cursorily discussed relationships with partner and children. In-depth discussion of the emotional commitment and detailed support of a partner were particularly lacking. As mentioned earlier, this may have related to privacy issues, perhaps even pertaining to childhood cultural adherence. This seems particularly likely as, in Annie's case, the importance of a loving partner relationship was expressed. Nevertheless, partner-related and children omissions were notable, and may have provided added contextual data for the narratives.

### **5.5.8 Mapping my own journey**

My reason for engaging with this topic stems from a lifelong interest in observations of individuals of a wide range of ages, and the way they lived their lives. It has appeared to me that many people seemed to display restrictive actions, in such areas as their behaviour, language, beliefs about others, or style of clothing worn, linked to a self-perception of a particular age, or to the way others regard them. My personal observation of others over a number of years has additionally noted an increasing number of people exhibiting behaviours that appear not to be related to generally conceived cultural perceptions of their age.

In conjunction with these observations, an ongoing family story pertains to my mother never telling her age. Moreover, all members of the family were similarly entreated to refrain from disclosure, under threat of dire consequences. My mother's declared reason for her view was a strong belief that once her age was known, there would be an expectation from others, both personally and in general contacts, that her actions be congruent with that chronological age, and in particular that she should not behave in a manner younger than her actual chronological age. In effect, this would be a potential restriction on the way she behaved due to others' perceptions of her age. While this view was generally regarded with some humour, I personally questioned whether her view of an added concept of individual freedom from a lack of categorisation could be substantiated. My mother never told her age throughout her life, and died shortly before the end of this study. My Mum inspired this study.

As a consequence of my Mum's views and action, I have had an interest in age and learning related concepts throughout most of my life. This is not an isolated occurrence; Tierney (2000) emphasises an increasing incidence of researchers focusing on areas of common interest to ageing subjects, with Estes (1979) referring to the vested interest of researchers into ageing as "the ageing enterprise". This could be viewed as particularly relevant in Phase Three of this study, where it is argued that this ongoing interest has assisted in providing thoughtful consideration of the narrative, in a conjoined understanding and awareness of content issues related to key concepts of the study.

During the interviews, in which interviewees described sensitive and often previously private areas of their lives, I found myself aware of the privilege of being allowed to share in the powerful stories of their life experiences, with the strong underlying emotional content often present. This researcher involvement incorporated emotional and cognitive involvement in the interactions related to these interviews. Between interviews, I found myself thinking of what had been said, and sometimes reflecting on the discovery of hitherto little regarded events that had influenced my own life.

My reflections were catalysed by the open and private nature of the comments made in the interviews. Denzin (2001) emphasises the critical assistance that emotional involvement in the storied experiences can provide, by aiding in meaningfully interpreting data. My longstanding reflective interest in elements of the researched topic also enabled, I would argue, the likelihood of a deeper understanding and empathic interaction in the interviews, and later in interpretive analysis of the transcripts.

A critical element in interpretation relates to empathic understanding. Mead (1934 as cited in Denzin 2001, p.138) regarded this as “taking the attitude of the other”. Silverman (2000, p.125) refers to Glassner and Loughlin’s (1987) assertions that, “...narrative analysis works through examining the nature and sources of ‘the frame of explanation’ used by the interviewee”. The focus within this form of analysis is to perceive the subject’s storied discussions from the uniqueness of their own position, and my empathic interest assisted this process. This affective involvement corresponds to aspects of Goleman’s (1995) qualities of “emotional intelligence” being inherent in transformational learning (Mezirow 2000, p.11).

An endeavour to listen empathetically in the interview interactions was followed by further informal contact after each interview in ‘having a coffee’ where subjects were removed from any influence related to knowledge of a tape recording occurring. The written report of the interviews attempted to emphasise the character of the subjects, as revealed in the interview process, in a congruent presentation style to the narrative process followed.

The knowledge, perspectives and understanding the researcher brings to the interview is of significance, as earlier discussed; nevertheless, this phase of the study has been interpreted primarily from a positional view of some commonality with Catherine Bateson:

I have not tried to verify these narratives, beyond attending to issues of internal consistency and checking them against my knowledge of the individuals... The

accounts are shaped by each person's choice and selective memory... These are stories I have used to think with. (1990, p.33 as cited in Tierney 2000, p.542).

The stories elicited are the stories I have thought with.

Bytheway (2000, p.783) maintains the importance of disclosure of age as being integral in a study, as he maintains, "the question of who 'we' are and who 'they' are becomes critical in how we write about 'old people'". In writing about ageing issues, the age of the researcher is one contextual element relative to the research. My present age is fifty-seven and while I would be reluctant to regard my chronological age as being influential to the study, I readily accept that the way I have viewed the interactive process and content of the study is reflexive to my accumulated experiences.

However, it is also apparent throughout this study that chronological age is not the major contextual element in ageing. Two other critical areas are the experiences of life and how those experiences have been responded to. In accepting that the researcher has affected the study, for reflective self-understanding to occur it is necessary to be cognisant of influences; as Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.41) state, "...qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically given. There is no value-free or bias-free design". One view of the influential involvement of the researcher in the research is suggested by Clifford (1970, p.108): "a biographer's own inner convictions are unconsciously grafted on his subject". He regards biographical objectivity as illusory. It is argued earlier that the open exposition of researcher influence can be viewed as beneficial to understanding process and outcomes of the study.

Silverman (2000, p.206) suggests asking the question, "Can I learn anything from relations with subjects in the field?" and answers, "One way of answering this question is to think through how your own identity was viewed by the participants". My perception of how I have been regarded is as both researcher and, in revealing confidential and at times deeply personal information, as intimate companion. In considering what I've learned from the subjects, therefore, simple explication is not easily made, particularly as

the roles taken by the respondent may have varied. For example, with Auntie as the narrator of Aboriginal stories, and also in a more intimate companion role involved in sharing dreams of a future life. Consequently, in the interaction between researcher-interviewee the “stock of knowledge” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, p.30) of the respondent may be different for the roles followed.

The metaphor for my life’s journey is a quest. This involves a journey with a wide range of experiences to be encountered and adversities to be overcome in achieving the outcome desired. Emphasis is placed upon the way those life experiences are responded to in eventual achievement of the outcome of the quest. Learning occurred from the subjects in the study from absorption of the inspirational stories of authentic emotional responses to their life experiences and stimulation from them. Subsequently, the positive views taken and stories expressed reinforced my perceptions of responses to difficult life experiences. Furthermore, in regard to the range of changes in the subjects’ lives, there was an overall sense of realisation that in life, through change, anything can happen.

My journey, in terms of the actual research project, has involved a wide range of learning experiences, often with discomfort in adjustment to the changes necessary to the research process undertaken. Although the study has involved a high emotional and intellectual investment, it has been a considered decision. Dominating my personal efforts has been a belief that I can assist in perceptions of ageing, and that I can assist ageing to be viewed more openly than it presently often is. As Tierney (2000 p.549) maintains, “The challenge becomes the desire to change the more oppressive aspects of life that silence and marginalize some and privilege others”. For example, the effect of age for many people of higher chronological age is that of reduced empowerment, whereas a focus on youth and youthfulness certainly could be viewed as privileging some rather than others.

During the course of this study, the concept of ageing has rarely been far from my mind. Despite the interesting issues arising, comments and concepts reflected upon, it was not until Phase Three that a higher level of emotional involvement occurred. The stories of the participants became part of my story.

Authentic emotional response, and realisation in myself of identity resources utilised to deal with adversities arising within the course of the study, included dealing with my father's death and a major relationship breakdown. A crafting of my identity occurred as a part of my quest. Betty Friedan (1993) related that she started with denial and fear in beginning to write *The Fountain of Age*. For me this study started with trepidation and curiosity about what I would discover in the study, and about myself. Nevertheless, there has been a similar finish to Friedan's, with affirmation and celebration.

### 5.5.9 Summary

The case study narratives can be viewed as leading to an understanding of the lives of the subjects. In effect, the stories can be viewed as "masks through which we can be seen" (Grumet 1980 in Barone 2001, p.162). The views expressed have been valuable in respect to study aims. They demonstrate the complexities of the subjects' consciousnesses in regard to the shaping of identity, and the utilisation of identity resources in regard to agelessness and lifelong learning. As Vygotsky (1987, pp.236-237 in Seidman 1998, p.1) emphasises, "Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness". In the narratives, attitude and actions in response to a life event were deemed by the subjects to be more important than the life event itself.

Themes of agelessness and lifelong learning emerged and were explored in conjunction with shaping of identity and development of identity resources. The life histories of the subjects demonstrated observed characteristics as well as more hidden characteristics emerging in the narratives, and led to a deeper understanding of the utilisation of the characteristics, with underlying tenets acting as a basis for decision-making in change.



## **Chapter Six: Discussion and conclusions**

### **6.1 Introduction: Thesis of the study and research questions**

The purpose of this study was to address areas of importance to understanding the changing cultural perceptions of age. It investigated the concept of agelessness and included exploration of characteristics of agelessness. It also ascertained influences that may contribute to elements of an agelessness mindset. Insights into these influences, and perceived linkages to lifelong learning and the role of social wellbeing, were sought from the views of a number of individuals encompassing a wide range of chronological ages.

The concept of chronological age has long been used as a basis for organising society (Neugarten and Neugarten 1986, Settersten and Mayer 1997, Rowe and Kahn 1998). Recent increases in longevity have created effects related to inter-generational conflict, age segregation, a growing social force of people at older ages, and societal financial implications. Longevity increases have amplified both the necessity of a political response and the likelihood of an increase in individual responsibility. Key issues in ageing in society include perceptions of ageing and how the average additional years will be lived. Increases in longevity also raise questions regarding lifelong learning and the role of social wellbeing in ageing.

This chapter provides a review of the key issues and main findings in relation to these research questions along with implications and recommendations that arose from the study. The results are summarised through consideration of each of the research questions of the study in turn. Consequently, conclusions are discussed from the findings that arose in relation to research questions one to six, before the guiding research question is considered. Subsequently, implications of the study, being policy implications, implications for practice, further research and methodological considerations are considered, and concluding comments of the dissertation are stated.

6.2 Answering the research questions

Research Question One: What are the characteristics of agelessness?

The characteristics of agelessness in the accumulated analysis were found to include observable characteristics and veiled qualities. The observable characteristics were: change agent, actively involved in life, animated non-age-related physical appearance, affirmative mindset, unrestricted attitudes to age and effective inter-generational communicator. Veiled qualities were named as: authenticity in action, self-reflective learner, altruistic, developed spiritual ideology, accepting of others, and self-belief. Both the observable characteristics and the veiled qualities are viewed together as identity resources of agelessness. These identity resources would appear to reflect an active and productive attitude, unrestricted by age, from which to enact potential life experiences.

Observable characteristics of agelessness were developed initially in Phase One as Thematic Area Groupings (TAGs) and later regarded, with adjusted titles, to encapsulate the participants’ views in Phases Two and Three. They were observable by the subjects of Phases One and Two. Effective inter-generational communicator was added to the original Phase One groupings as there was increased importance given to this area in Phase Two, and particularly in the narratives of Phase Three. In Phase One, effective inter-generational communicator was referred to as part of the attitudes to age TAG in terms of interacting widely with a range of ages. Consequently this grouping was regarded as observable across the study. Additional characteristics, named as veiled qualities, emerged in Phase Three, as discussed in the cross-case analysis of Chapter Five. In Tables Four and Five, identity resources are profiled below firstly as observable characteristics and secondly as veiled qualities:

Table Four: Observable characteristics (initiated in Phase One and adapted by Phases Two and Three)

Observable	Categorisation	Discussion
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<b>character-istics</b>		
Change agent	Risk-taker, free-thinker, enquiring mind, and non-conformist.	Initiated in Phase One and endorsed in Phase Two as role model, inspiration, interesting companion and supporter. Prominent in Phase Three.
Actively involved in life	Energetic, passionate, and active.	Initiated in Phase One and endorsed in Phase Two, as represented by “a love of everything”. Prominent in Phase Three. Additionally the subjects all appeared to be highly proficient at their major undertakings.
Animated non-age related physical appearance	Physical age representation minimised, noticeable physical energy, and non-age-related outlook to physical appearance.	Physical representation was the least represented category in Phases One and Two though mentioned in Phase Two as “sudden visual impact”. Looking younger, for example, was not regarded as a characteristic of agelessness in Phases Two and Three. Of the noticeable physical features, a sense of energy and liveliness was regarded as conspicuous in the later phases of the study. Attitude to physical appearance not being of importance was consistent throughout the phases of the study, as embodied by the comment “doesn’t try to look like they’re young or old”.
Affirmative mindset	Positive thinker, sense of fun/spontaneity, caring, and a calm manner.	Positive thinker was a central notion in both Phases Two and Three. A sense of fun/spontaneity was endorsed in Phase Two and notable throughout the narratives. Caring was mentioned in Phase Two and evident in Phase Three. A calm manner was identified in Phases Two and Three.
Unrestricted attitudes to age	Unacknowledged perception of own age, and learns unrestricted by age.	Attitude to age was a central notion of all three phases. Tended to be unrestricted and unaware of own age, and/or felt twenty to thirty years younger than chronological age, were mentioned prominently in Phase

		Three.
Effective inter-generational communicator	Interacts widely with a range of ages. A good communicator	Demonstrated across all three phases of the study. In Phase Two personal experience of others was thought to be crucial to avoiding misunderstanding across age ranges. In Phase Three the participants all reflected their ability to be involved and to communicate across age groupings, both with those younger and older than themselves.

Table Five: Veiled qualities (initiated in Phase Three)

Veiled qualities	Categorisation	Discussion
Authenticity in action	Actions demonstrated authentic emotional response in accord with life experiences and across situated contexts.	Pre-eminent in Phase Three but not mentioned in Phases One and Two. Genuineness of actions in response to life events, and across a variety of contexts was notable in Phase Three.
Self-reflective learner	Self-understanding was viewed as a basis for authentic response to events, issues, and concerns in their lives.	Pre-eminent in Phase Three but not mentioned in Phases One and Two. Self-reflection about past and present experiences was a central notion throughout the Phase Three narratives.
Altruistic	Manifested through generosity of giving without expectation of return.	Pre-eminent in Phase Three but not mentioned in Phases One and Two. Altruistic actions are viewed as a representation of authentic demonstration of meaningfulness
Developed	Although influenced	Despite being mentioned only once in Phase One and not

spiritual ideology	by formal religions, such as Christianity, Taoism or Buddhism, spiritual interpretations were expressed differently and conceived individually.	at all in Phase Two, having a declared spiritual ideology was notable for each of the case study participants.
Accepting of others	An acceptance of the actions of others.	In choosing attitude and action in response to change, the Phase Three response was focused on changing themselves and not trying to change others. In Phase Three being change agents for others was nevertheless mainly enacted through modelling. Throughout the narratives there was a stated and implied acceptance of others. In Phase Two mention was made of being non-judgmental and open to listening.
Self-belief	High self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem.	Notable in Phase Three as high self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Self-confidence was noticeable originally as part of the affirmative mindset TAG. However, self-confidence was emphasised in Phases Two and Three and is better incorporated into the wider quality of self-belief.  These qualities were viewed as enabling resistance to expectations of individuals and of society. To have a choice to refuse to accept “what I should be doing at a particular age” through self-belief and to be able, for example, to be a younger eccentric if wished “because I can” was advocated. In Phase Two self-belief was suggested in the need to resist “indoctrinating messages” from society.

Agelessness characteristics were perceived by study participants as being demonstrated mainly by a mental approach and not in a physical manner. The importance of mental attitude is a central notion in the characteristics developed in the three phases of the study. Apart from Phase One TAGs, Phase Two comments emphasised mental approaches towards aspects of ageing, such as attitudes towards age, a sense of humour and a sense of fun. The participants in the study supported the importance of a positive mindset related to learning from change, verifying Seligman (1994) and Bennetts (2003). Positive approaches to change were suggested in the study, particularly in relation to learning from what has occurred. This was narrated in the case studies as a love of learning and positive reflective habits. Consequently, taking a positive approach was felt to increase happiness and was thought by the focus groups to reduce unhappiness and depression. In Phase Three, the cases again emphasised aspects of mental attitude such as positive thinking approaches, a sense of humour and self-belief in responding to life experiences.

As discussed in Chapter Five, agelessness characteristics are viewed as identity resources and are utilised, based on underlying tenets, as available personal resources in response to change and adversity across situated contexts. Furthermore, identity resources can be interactive in relation to one another, and it would also appear that the further enactment of identity resources assists their development.

**Research Question Two: What are the characteristics of lifelong learning?**

For the purposes of this study the chosen profile of characteristics representative of lifelong learners was based on the profile developed by Candy et al (1994, pp.43-44) and adapted by Kearns (1999).

**Table Six: Characteristics of lifelong learning**

Characteristics	Categorisation	Brief discussion related to the study

An inquiring mind and curiosity	Has a sense of curiosity and question asking; love of learning and discovery; reflective habits; can apply strategies to enhance creative resourcefulness.	Curiosity, a love of learning, and reflective habits were demonstrated in the narratives. Application to creative resourcefulness might not be observed so plainly.
Helicopter vision	Has a sense of the interconnectedness of things; ability to apply systems perspectives and 'see the big picture'; the capacity for strategic thinking; a vision that goes beyond own job or field of study.	The reflective habits of the case study subjects and a sense of meaning and emphasis on living life according to priorities, could be held to relate to the described characteristics of interconnectedness, viewing of the 'big picture', strategic thinking and a vision of life.
A repertoire of learning skills	Has learning-to-learn strategies; knows own strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning styles; has a range of strategies for learning in various contexts.	Self-understanding and knowledge of their own learning were prominent in the narratives.
A commitment to personal mastery and on-going development	Has motivation, a desire for learning throughout life, and confidence in own learning ability; a commitment to on-going personal and career development; self-esteem and a positive concept of self as capable and autonomous; the capacity to deal with change.	A high level of self-esteem, a desire to learn throughout life and the capacity to respond to change were noticeable in the narratives.
Interpersonal	Has the ability to learn from others	The case study subjects gave

effectiveness	in teams; the ability to give and receive feed-back in team learning situations; a group orientation and can contribute to team learning; cultural understanding and can learn in situations involving cultural diversity in Australia and overseas.	feed-back in interactions, and emphasised learning from others, though not necessarily in team-based situations. Cultural awareness was clearly demonstrated by the case study subjects.
Displays information literacy (adapted)	Has the ability to locate, evaluate, manage and use information in a range of contexts; can use modern information technologies for these purposes; has a good sense of knowledge acquisition and generation, and can contribute to turning workplace learning into shared knowledge.	Although information literacy was not regarded as a specific area of competence in the narratives, the subjects demonstrated involvement. One case study subject had his own website, and another wrote a successful autobiography.

In Phases Two and Three the concept of lifelong learning occurring from birth to death through a wide range of life experiences was supported. Furthermore, prominence of independence in learning was emphasised as “a love of learning” and consistent to reflective habits, with informal learning and choice of learning within formal contexts in accord with Candy et al (1994), Foley (1995), and Mezirow (2000).

In Phase Two lifelong learning through experience rather than age was maintained as being influential on learning. Learning as essential to living was supported with the rhetorical question “Who are not the lifelong learners?” Furthermore, in Phase Two, an emphasis on the importance of attitude to learning was suggested, with involvement and openness to learning, particularly from informal learning situations, advocated. Limitations to learning through poor health and mobility were discussed briefly as being influences on social wellbeing. Also, a possible motivation for choosing to learn included the fear of being a burden to others in advanced age. Age was not regarded as being



restrictive to learning. As one group member commented, “You don’t define your learning by your age, but it depends on how self-aware you are”. Learning from a wide range of contexts was also suggested in the case studies.

Consequently, the characteristics profiled by Kearns (1999) and Candy et al (1994) were strongly supported within this study. The three case studies could be viewed as encapsulating many of the characteristics tabled. Response and adaptation to new learning was also noticeable in the narratives, and suggests that challenges from ongoing technological change could be viewed as being supportive of this area, as in Trinh’s involvement in information literacy and Auntie’s writing of her autobiography.

### **Research Question Three: What are the connections between agelessness and social wellbeing?**

Social wellbeing can be regarded as being connected to agelessness as a major underlying tenet for enactment of identity resources. Antonovsky’s (1987 in Maddox 1991) principal foundations for social wellbeing were supported in Phases Two and Three of the study in regard to the importance of self-understanding, empowerment through meaningfulness of life, and developing the resources necessary to meet life challenges, especially those related to good health.

However, it became evident through the narratives that other aspects related to social wellbeing as an underlying tenet were emphasised. Firstly, wellness as discussed by Levy (1978) was particularly prominent in the narratives. A striking emphasis was noticeable related to intrinsic motivation, suspension of reality – being “the loss of the ‘real self’ and the temporary acceptance of an ‘illusory self’ or ‘imaginary self’” – and “internal locus of control” (p.12). Secondly, happiness was also supported in the study as being important for social wellbeing and was present in the views the three case study subjects. The marked mention of happiness affirms Diener et al’s (1999, p.295) summation of a happy person: “tends to look on the bright side of things, and does not ruminate excessively

about bad events, and is living in an economically developed society, has social confidants, and possesses adequate resources for making progress toward valued goals”.

**Research Question Four: Why do some individuals exhibit characteristics of agelessness?**

Characteristics of agelessness are thought to be developed from a variety of environmental and personal influences. These were: being a lifelong learner, the modelling by another, openness to learning through high self-esteem and confidence, learning by self-understanding from life experiences, and through a critical life event acting as a catalyst.

Although the wording of this research question has, on reflection, some ambiguity, the sought and discussed perspective was related to how the characteristics of agelessness originated and were developed. Phase Two discussion centred upon the areas of nature or nurture as being the sources for development of agelessness characteristics. In comments regarding innateness by several focus group members there was a suggestion, not supported by the majority of the group members, that people demonstrated characteristics of agelessness through being born with a pre-disposition to enact behaviour, viewed as “an inner drive in some individuals”.

However, several originating environmental sources emerged distinctly in both the Phase Two focus groups and the Phase Three case studies. Firstly, lifelong learning was advocated through responding to change by learning from the experiences encountered. Secondly, the influence of role models emerged in the narratives, with parents, a teacher and even the behaviour of an observed stranger cited as models for attainment and development of agelessness characteristics. Personal modelling would appear to assist in continuing to develop characteristics, in effect by following the attitude with actions. An example is in the use of words regarding ageing through a choice repertoire (Jolanki et al 2000).

Thirdly, self-belief incorporating self-esteem and self-confidence was referred to in the focus groups as “keys to agelessness” and was notable in the narratives. Self-belief was regarded as allowing openness to learning and enhancement of the ability to act through available developed agelessness characteristics. Furthermore, through self-belief, there was a willingness to take risks and use the characteristics developed.

A fourth initiating factor was through learning by self-understanding from life experiences. The importance of reflective skills in continuing to learn about oneself were discussed earlier in this chapter and were also mentioned in Phase Two and noticeable in Phase Three as being instrumental in development of characteristics of agelessness. Although an important characteristic of lifelong learning, reflective skills are separated from lifelong learning in this section due to their selection as a characteristic of agelessness and the particular prominence with which they were regarded in the narratives. A fifth originating source to come into view from the narratives was through critical life events and this is discussed in the following research question. The crucial role of learning was particularly noticeable in developing agelessness characteristics.

Furthermore, underlying tenets provide the basis for developing and exhibiting characteristics of agelessness. For example, underlying tenets relating to cultural background and developed value systems, as well as of social wellbeing, were instrumental in formulating the foundation for development of characteristics, in effect providing “the opportunity to stretch my horizons” as a focus group member stated. However, a societal context for specific events (based on Erben 1998) such as a war occurring created potential restrictions, though this could be dependent on other underlying tenets and the response chosen. In addition, as a focus group member suggested, social changes had a cumulative effect on demonstration of agelessness characteristics: “Once grandmas were old people, now we’re into everything”.

Characteristics of agelessness were developed by overcoming restrictions of limiting beliefs and stereotypical age behaviour. Limiting beliefs, based on chronological age, emerged in Phases Two and Three as being restrictive on the way our lives are

conducted. Stereotypical age behaviour at different ages, including younger ages, was noted as limiting by the focus groups, with the groups reflecting on fixed attitudes demonstrated in lifestyles through stereotypical dress and by conformity to stereotypical cultural images of age, with one evocative visual image of a retired non-involvement “...like living in a cloud of candy floss, pink, soft”.

Also, attitudinal tendencies towards negative states of mind throughout life, and particularly influenced by depression, were viewed as being in a “stereotypical slot” and consequently restrictive to a choice of living responsive to agelessness characteristics. Further restrictive influences could also occur through some cultural perspectives on age and ageing such as the view of ageing taken by society, with a perception of a negatively stereotypical manner of the mass media within Australian society on the basis of individuals’ higher chronological ages emerging in the study.

Internal inconsistencies are an area that demonstrates some resistance to the expression of agelessness characteristics. While the characteristics of agelessness were demonstrated in the narratives, as discussed, individual contradictions were noted. Particular observations were made regarding occasional incongruity in display of authenticity. For example, Annie’s desire to fully experience all life events could be viewed as being contradicted by her self-talk of “This will soon be over”. The issues relating to authenticity appear to be complex; however, it seems that spontaneous actions could have repercussions, either foreseen or unforeseen. An illustration is Auntie resisting declaring her views to other Aboriginal elders due to expected and foreseen consequences.

**Research Question Five: Do critical life events influence an individual’s choices associated with attaining agelessness?**

Critical life events and in particular epiphanies were catalysts for change in the development of identity resources attributed to agelessness. In the case studies, the way changes were responded to influenced the development of characteristics relating to agelessness, as discussed in Chapter Five. Critical life events were described to the focus

groups as being something that happens in our lives as the catalyst for change. Events that are catalysts to questioning a belief, in Scott's terms (1998, p.178) are "something that unsettles us, shakes us up", leading to a resultant new interpretation that can be regarded as transformative (Mezirow 1990).

Nevertheless, it is clear that some events and experiences in a life are more influential than others and can be described as epiphanies (Denzin 2001). Epiphanies, being crucial moments in our lives, are also catalysts for change in the way our identities develop and are integral to what then follows in our lives. According to Denzin (2001, p.59) "The biographical, interpretive method rests on the collection, analysis, and performance of stories, accounts and narratives that speak to turning point moments in people's lives". What I viewed as epiphanies were crucial to some major life changes in the narratives, and in particular to changes related to perceptions of ageing. Epiphanies, according to Denzin (2001, p.34), are "interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives... having had such a moment the person is never the same again".

Critical life events, including epiphanies, had an influence on changes in personality characteristics. Nevertheless, it was through the available developed identity resource personality characteristics that there was a willingness to take risks in enacting change. In effect, adaptation and the ability to adapt were influenced by critical life events.

The recognition of what I saw as epiphanies in the case studies was not always consistent with the view of the participants. However, perhaps this can be attributed to different individual perceptions of the importance of an event, or as one focus group member commented in discussing critical life events, "this may not be conscious". Nevertheless, the enacted response to a life event was more significant than the name attributed to it, as suggested by a focus group member's comment that "having moments of wisdom that literally deepen you, you're not going to forget them".

Adversities in critical life events were particularly notable in the case studies. Epiphanies were an area where this appeared most likely to occur. Many of the case study epiphanies

involved adversity deemed to be outside the control of the subject in question. Nevertheless, despite events occurring outside of any perceived control there still existed an individual choice both in the response and in the personal change elicited by the event. Through demonstrating openness to learning about themselves in adversity unrelated to age restrictions, the participants' actions were based upon a combination of authentic emotional response and positive thinking, and led to a constant re-negotiation of identity. The subjects' actions emphasised that the combination of their attitude and their action in responding to change was crucial to the effect of the change. The subjects utilised metaphors to describe their perceptions of the difficulties to be overcome in their inner journey. Tranh's stream of life experiences and the rocks presenting challenges is an example of such a metaphor.

Despite adverse circumstances from environmental events, the subjects all could arguably be viewed as constructing in their lives a basis of "...works well, loves well and expects well notwithstanding profound life adversity" (Werner and Smith 1982, p.8). In doing so they can be said to have displayed some aspects of resilience in the way they undertook to respond to life adversities. Some characteristics related to attributes of resilience (Benard 1991, p.3), being "...qualities of responsiveness, flexibility, empathy and caring, communication skills, a sense of humor, and any other prosocial behavior", were noted in the narratives. Furthermore, they all elucidated on the importance of autonomy, thought to be a central notion in resilience (Benard 1991 and 1993, Lewis and Harrell 2002).

**Research Question Six: What comparisons can be made between perceived characteristics of agelessness and perceived characteristics of lifelong learning?**

On the evidence of the results from the phases of this study, people demonstrating agelessness characteristics are lifelong learners in terms of displaying many of the characteristics discussed in this study to be associated with lifelong learning. In many areas, the depicted characteristics of lifelong learning from perceptions of the subjects in Phases One and Two and deduced from the narratives in Phase Three portrayed those related to agelessness. For example, in areas of learning from experiences, self-reflection,

informal learning and in interpersonal effectiveness, there are notable similarities. However, as will be seen in the answer to the next research question a deeper representation has emerged through the study relating to the enactment of the characteristics.

**The guiding research question: How does agelessness relate to lifelong learning?**

There is a link between agelessness and lifelong learning. From the results of this study, someone demonstrating agelessness characteristics can be viewed as demonstrating the characteristics of a lifelong learner. However, the agelessness characteristics displayed by the subjects are identity resources of a special quality and nature. The key attribute underlying agelessness lifelong learners is their identity, and part of that identity is that they see themselves as having personal resource qualities – named here as identity resources – unrelated to age.

This study sought clarification and further understanding of the concept of agelessness. Agelessness is characterised by identity resources, elicited from subject perceptions in the exploratory study and through further exploration in Phases Two and Three. These agelessness characteristics are utilised in response to change, unrelated to societal expectations about age conformity.

Identity resource characteristics of agelessness can be viewed in terms of what can be observed and what is hidden, represented in this study by the initial development of TAGs and veiled qualities. Agelessness characteristics initiated in Phases One and Two were observable to the subjects, however in Phase Three characteristics emerged that were not apparent to the subjects of the earlier phases and were named as veiled qualities.

On the evidence of the results from the phases of this study, people demonstrating agelessness characteristics are lifelong learners in terms of displaying many of the characteristics discussed in this study to be associated with lifelong learning. There were considerable similarities in characteristics between lifelong learning and agelessness. In

the case studies, the approach of the subjects to learning was particularly noticeable. The concept of choice to learn in formal settings and emphasis on informal learning was marked, together with learning from the multiplicity of life events.

Consequently, for the case study participants there was a constant state of flux in their ongoing identity development through the effect that new learning continued to have on them. As Wenger (1998, p.263) states, "Education in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state". Reflective self-understanding was prominent in the case studies, affirming Mezirow (1990), and was crucial in negotiating the positions of interaction between change and continuity inherent in a durable self-identity (Andrews 1999).

It was noticeable that the case study subjects viewed change and particularly adversity as prospective learning opportunities. The subjects of Phase Three regarded the need for openness to new experiences as critical to learning. Flexibility was viewed as important in responding to learning opportunities, endorsing Settersten and Lovegreen's (1998) position and particularly in the light of the changes generally occurring to age-norms, precipitating Alheit's (1994 in Field 2000) suggestion of do-it-yourself biography in response to the creation of flexible life-courses. However, family involvement prior to retirement was suggested as being restrictive to engagement in formal learning.

The case study subjects regarded learning as an active lifelong process to be undertaken in response to life experiences. Candy et al (1994, p.44) emphasise that the utilisation of characteristics in a life context is crucial: "overarching all these various attributes is the ability to act strategically as learning needs and opportunities arise". As Wenger (1998, p.215) maintains, "Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming".



From the results of this study, someone demonstrating agelessness characteristics also demonstrates many of the characteristics of a lifelong learner. The case study participants displayed agelessness characteristics in terms of Phase One and Two findings, and can be deduced to have also developed other agelessness characteristics, named in Chapter Five as veiled qualities. All agelessness characteristics can be regarded as personal resources for use, if necessary, in response to change and adversity.

People demonstrating the identity resource characteristics of agelessness are more likely to be open to instructional and learning opportunities throughout their lives. There is a multifaceted interaction between the demonstration of agelessness characteristics and the learning practices of the individual within a wide range of situated contexts. The interaction of these can lead to the transformation of personal identity.

Identity resources are only part of the representation of agelessness; it is the way in which the characteristics are demonstrated that would seem to identify a collective quality of agelessness. In the ongoing crafting of an agelessness identity, attitude and response are more significant than what occurs in a person's life. This recalls Fullan's (1993) maintenance of the importance of the response that is made to change. Although the case studies demonstrated some differences in the way change and adversity was responded to, commonality in strategies was notable, including authentic emotional response and positive thinking, inter-generational communication, by 'bouncing back' in terms of resilience (Benard 1991) and importantly by lifelong learning from the experiences encountered, for example by transformative learning based on reflection. An openness to learning about themselves, unrelated to age restrictions from the lived experience, and constant re-negotiation of identity, were noticeable.

Embedded within the Phase Three stories are descriptions of self-construction as change agents within the case study participants' own lives and those of others. Identity resources are used as revealed prevailing personality characteristics of lived agelessness in response to normative or nonnormative life events. It is contended that the subjects of the case studies saw themselves as having these identity resources and consequently

emphasise confirmation and construction of identity through an engaged response to lifelong learning opportunities, to change, and through experiences in overcoming adversity.

However, there is no such thing as a typical 'agelessness' person. The evidence of the subjects of this study was that there was individual attainment and development of characteristics of agelessness. Furthermore, while the case study participants demonstrated many of the emerged characteristics, an identity template of characteristics, with all the characteristics held uniformly, did not emerge. This echoed Kaufman's (1986, p.32) view of biographical subjects: "Because detailed life stories and their emergent themes are unique and idiosyncratic, one cannot speak of a 'typical' life or a 'typical' set of themes". Cranton (2000, p.203) maintains "An awareness of individual differences among learners in the transformative process helps us to provide opportunities for everyone to use his or her preferred approach to critical reflection and discourse". Internal inconsistency could be viewed as a demonstration of human individuality and occasional unpredictability.

Several important issues relating to agelessness were notable. The overcoming of adversity, locus of control, situated contexts for actions and the underlying tenets for decision-making were instrumental in regard to demonstration of agelessness characteristics. An important notion in the narratives that resonated with the case studies was the overcoming of adversity. People who demonstrate agelessness characteristics, both overt and hidden, have developed identity resources to respond to change and adversity. Identity resources were manifested through adversity, and particularly involved the catalytic impact of epiphanies. Critical life events including epiphanies were instrumental in assisting development of identity resources.

The perception of locus of control or situational context was not deemed to be influential to enactment of identity resources. Although the cases showed a preference for enacting change within their control, developed identity resources, and a belief that it is not what happens that is important but the way that what occurs is responded to, were influential in

response to change. Consequently, whether what happens is within or outside of personal control did not appear to change the response.

Similarly, authenticity in demonstration of identity was likely to be reflected in enactment of agelessness characteristics across situated contexts. Authenticity was important as the way a situation was responded to and not behaving in a genuine manner may have limited what was learned from the experience. The focus groups could not perceive agelessness actions within particular contexts. For example, they often experienced difficulty in situating agelessness related actions within a local context for specific events, necessitating a general everyday lifestyle category to be created relative to the comments made.

Nevertheless, decisions were made based upon some developed underlying tenets. The case study participants' development of agelessness characteristics was notable for the integration of past, present and future with the important influences of childhood affecting the building of underlying tenets from the background culture and through evolving value systems. For example, a humanistic value system influenced attitude towards age and cultural influences, including Aboriginal respect for age impacting on utilised agelessness characteristics in response to life events, as well as social wellbeing aspects such as health being influential.

### **6.3 Conclusions of the study**

Based upon the discussion that took place around the research questions in the previous sections, I now distil the following conclusions for the study. There are four main conclusions for the study:

1. It is concluded that agelessness characteristics are identity resources, being personality characteristics that are potential personal resources to be derived and utilised in enacting life experiences. Agelessness characteristics can be viewed as observable characteristics and veiled qualities. The agelessness identity resources reflect an active and productive

mindset for involvement in life experiences unrestricted by age. However, it is the way the characteristics are demonstrated, through attitude and response to change, that appears to identify a collective quality of agelessness.

2. People demonstrating agelessness characteristics also demonstrate many of the characteristics of lifelong learners. In addition, they see themselves as having identity resources of a particular kind or quality incorporated into their identities. These identity resources enable constant crafting of their identities through an openness to an active lifelong process of learning through authentic actions across situated contexts. A flexible response to learning opportunities through change and adversity is enacted, with an emphasis on independent and informal learning.

3. Identity resources were manifested through environmental sources. In the individual attainment and development of characteristics of agelessness, attitude and response are more significant than the events themselves, particularly in overcoming restrictions of limiting beliefs and stereotypical age behaviour. People viewed as demonstrating agelessness characteristics were change agents, both for themselves and often for others. They craft their ongoing identity through attitude and actions in response to the lifelong learning opportunities of change.

However, it was noticeable in the narratives that critical life events, in particular epiphanies and adversity, were influential as a catalyst for learning from change. Also, being a lifelong learner, the influence of modelling by another, openness to learning through self belief, and learning by reflected self-understanding from life experiences, were all potential catalysts for identity resource development.

4. Underlying tenets provide a foundation for enacting identity resources of agelessness. The influence of culture on the development of a value system, as well as the role of social wellbeing components in responding to life experiences, are important as a basis for decision-making in response to changes, including critical life events and adversity. Consequently, the shaping of identity is assisted by underlying tenets.

## 6.4 Implications of the study

### 6.4.1 Policy implications

Based upon the findings and conclusions of this study there are implications relating to policy development and implementation, and personal implications for practice.

Within this study, a number of significant issues with policy implications relating to ageing were prominent. The increase in longevity over the past century is likely to continue to occur into the future. The increase in longevity has necessitated changes in the way ageing is viewed, and as a result, the way lives are lived will be different from the past. Normative life transition stages that were more predictable in past years (Neugarten 1972) are now less predictable (Neugarten and Neugarten 1986, Peterson 1996, Settersten and Hagestad 1996b, Settersten 1997). As a result, the biographies of individuals have become far less predictable and the range of possibilities for a life lived has increased (Alheit 1992). For example, this is apparent in more frequent changes in occupation and employment, in times of marrying and increases in divorce (Settersten 1997).

As a result of longevity increases, there are implications in two main areas: firstly, through government societal policy involvement, and secondly, through personal responsibility and implications for practice, addressed in the next section.

There are policy challenges brought about by a changing society in regard to longevity in ageing. Wyndham, in his novel *Trouble with Lichen* (1963, p.177) based on 'anti-gerone treatment', the discovery of a serum extensively prolonging life, also weaves in the issue of societal difficulties in responding to increased longevity, such as:

... [the] prospect of three lifetimes spent at the factory bench... pensions even if the age of retirement were raised by a hundred years. Lack of opportunities for promotion... No fresh blood in anything. Rises in prices owing to increased

demand by increased population. Breakdown of National Health Service faced by population problems...

The novel concludes with forced change being responded to by a negative societal over-reaction. It is essential that changes occur in regard to ageing that are proactive rather than reactive to avoid potential societal conflict brought about by longevity reactions.

As far as people of a higher chronological age are concerned, a beneficial implication is the need for policies representing a change in the portrayed image of older people, in effect, to be an asset rather than a burden in terms of Rowe and Kahn (1998). This is particularly important as the increased numbers of the 'baby boomer' group is set to reach ages above sixty five within the next few years. SEETRC (1997, p.105) maintains that:

With an abundance of capable and healthy senior citizens emerging onto the scene, the tired stereotypes of old people as dependent and unproductive should disappear once and for all. Older people remain intelligent and curious, keen to learn *and to teach each other and those in their circle* about a wide range of subjects.

The role and actions of the mass media in the presentation of ageing in a more positive light needs urgent consideration.

A further implication is in the opportunity for impactful government policies through consideration of change in status and function of ageing in accord with the suggested changes regarding retirement. Government policies in response to increased longevity are likely to further eliminate retirement at the present 'normal' age, following the lead set by Costello (2004) in relation to increased working opportunities for older people. It would be preferable for change to be made on the basis of principles other than those of economics, however, the changes suggested by Costello (2004) are nevertheless likely to result in consideration of ageing in different ways to the present. The enacted concept of

agelessness discussed in this study has particular importance in assisting generation of freedom from restrictive structures and practices of cultural age perceptions and what that has entailed in the past.

An additional implication is in the importance of policies to assist in changing societal attitudes through the creation of experiences to enhance inter-generational communication. This would be beneficial in resisting potential conflict, such as the 'age wars' forecast by Longman (1986) and differences in generational identities (Dychtwald 1999). In the literature review, the area of inter-generational interaction was discussed regarding the need to resist the perception of an ageing population impacting heavily on resources. In this study, the avoidance of misunderstanding between age groups was generated as an important issue in responding to potential difficulties in this area, and it was considered that personal experience was a mitigating factor. For instance, the avoidance of misunderstanding can be instrumental in resisting inter-generational conflict, especially through age segregation (Biggs 1993), an issue that was discussed in Phase Two of the study and reflected the focus groups' perceptions of the negative labelling of different groups of people based upon their age. Neugarten (1972) drew attention, over thirty years ago, to social difficulties that could arise due to the increase in people of older ages. Biggs (1993, p.68) counselled against cohorts of a particular age as potentially being "a denigration of other groups", in effect adding to the possibility of inter-generational conflict. The practice of groups of similar ages such as the University of the Third Age would appear to be counter-productive in the following of this view. Nevertheless, the increased provision of a wide range of learning opportunities, both formal and informal, related to individuals' perceived learning needs would be beneficial, especially at older ages.

Agelessness can be regarded as an approach to ageing that has application and interaction across all age ranges. Consequently, a key question for policymakers arises: what can we do to increase the agelessness capital in our community?

### 6.4.2 Implications for practice

An implication is in the area of practice of personal responsibility, notwithstanding societal conditions affecting control over self-representation related to age. In managing some areas of external change, such as societal change from influences such as globalisation, there is often a perception of the individual as vulnerable and powerless to the risks involved in life (Furedi 1998). However, as Ecclestone (1999, p.345) suggests, “challenges to encroaching authoritarianism and pessimism demand a belief that people can solve problems and define what these are for themselves”. The subjects in the study chose to empower themselves in their response to change, by choosing to learn from the experiences of their lives unrestricted by age.

Consequent to changes to normative life transition stages, agelessness provides a constructive response to the increasing need for individual flexibility through change. In particular, there is likely to be an added emphasis upon individual responsibility for the way our lives are to be lived. As Field (2000, p.13) maintains, “All of us face discontinuities in our life course. And we face them in ways that often seem to leave us relying largely on our own resources”.

To attain increasing autonomy, in the face of a comet hitting – to paraphrase a comment made by a subject in the study – it will be necessary for older people to become a more assertive social force. This will involve resisting ageism and acting to avoid progressive evanescence. As Bruce Dawe (1978, p.113) observes:

In order to be forgotten  
It's not necessary to do much  
Except watch the wrinkles gather  
And the old friends depart

Stereotypical perceptions of ageing generally have negative connotations. However, the types and degree of stereotypes relating to age and ageing held within Australian society



are not clearly understood. Questions which further research might address include: Are there any circumstances when agelessness should not be aspired to? What is the extent to which agelessness is culturally based? Can agelessness be taught? To what extent can agelessness be attained?

Agelessness provides a way of regarding people that is not restricted by chronological age. It could be beneficial both economically and socially, and has considerable implications for individuals in empowering their lives in differing dimensions, and for learning communities within the learning society. Insights into the concept of agelessness and its linkage to lifelong learning may assist in encouraging and facilitating individuals of any age to choose to attain an agelessness approach to the experience of ageing. Furthermore, an agelessness approach is likely to improve their wellbeing by providing a means of understanding and restricting negative age-related influences.

In addition, a focus on participation in formal and informal learning situations within communities and the linkage to attitudes of agelessness would be useful. In effect, this focus would investigate the strength of the perceived connections between agelessness and lifelong learning.

### **6.4.3 Implications for further research**

The implications of this study for further research included the following issues arising from the data. Four particular issues arising in the study would benefit from further attention. Firstly, as veiled qualities only emerged later in the study, further understanding of these qualities and their development in response to particular changes would be useful. In particular, if major changes occur in response to adversity, then questions are raised as to the extent to which we can choose agelessness. Furthermore, additional research on the concept of agelessness, as viewed by different age groups, would be of value in the development of the concept across age ranges. This might examine, for example, whether people in their twenties or thirties have a different concept of agelessness from people in their forties and fifties. In Phase One stating age

was optional, and consequently a number of participants chose not to enter their age. Requesting ages for all was felt to be restrictive to the data being obtained, and at variance with the concept being discussed in this phase.

Secondly, research is also needed that examines the influence of physical appearance on changing perceptions of age and ageing. In contrast to the emphasis placed within aspects of society, such as the mass media, upon physical appearance, the findings of this study in regard to agelessness suggested a lack of emphasis on physical appearance. For example, the role given to the area of perception of physical appearance and its sub-elements is, on initial viewing, contrary to popular views on how age is demonstrated and is worthy of further investigation.

Thirdly, if ageing is to be viewed as a positive lifelong process then the role of utilising a positive viewpoint also needs further research. Although researchers sometimes argue about the value of positive thinking (Andrews 1999, Gibson 2000) it was apparent in this study that positive thinking was perceived by subjects to be important. This supports the view of Greene and Conrad (2002, p.55), who observe, "Evidence is also mounting that older adults who maintain an optimistic life view outlive their pessimistic counterparts".

Overall, ageing and the relationship to learning need more attention across disciplinary structures. Birren (1999, p.470) affirms that:

Ageing is a product of the interaction of many forces – genetic, environmental – and the accumulation of the products of chance events. Given this view, it seems desirable to adopt an ecological point of view of aging, and that this theory should embrace many forces not commonly grouped together as a result of disciplinary specialization.

Fourthly, after careful consideration, reference to the types of epiphanies within the narratives was omitted. The differing types of epiphanies were not able to be analysed closely within this study and therefore lacked relevance to the results from the study. It

would be useful in a further study to view the categories of epiphanies in more depth. Nevertheless, the types of epiphanies as stated by Denzin (2001, p.37) have relevance in providing the criteria for an epiphany and are retained within the definition.

#### **6.4.4 Implications for methodological considerations**

These were the issues that arose in regard to the methodology utilised in the study. The subjects in Phase One and Two of this study were enrolled at university, and therefore had an affinity with formal education. In effect, formal lifelong learners comprised a main part of the study. Concern could be expressed as to whether this was a privileged group. That these subjects were connected with formal education might explain why some characteristics were identified and not others. Furthermore, the lifelong learning characteristics of Kearns (1999), based on a profile developed by Candy et al (1994, pp.43-44), were originally developed in terms of undergraduate education, and consequently might be viewed to have limitations in utilisation of the characteristics outside of this setting.

Nevertheless, to maximise trustworthiness, it was thought preferable that subjects for Phase Three were chosen on a different basis to being lifelong learners in terms of declared interest in formal education. Consequently, selection of people in this phase was not limited to people who are presently working within the area of education and training. Moreover, only one of the three subjects selected was currently involved in the tertiary study area. Nevertheless, the role of formal education for each case study was addressed specifically, and the findings from these subjects tended to endorse the results from Phases One and Two in regard to TAGs, in particular.

Also in Phase One, requesting participants to give their age and the age of the agelessness person they were considering was felt to be restrictive and at variance with the concept being discussed in this phase. Consequently, entry of age was voluntary, though a further analysis of aspects relating to age of subjects and the agelessness person they were considering could have yielded useful data.

In Phase Two it would have been beneficial to have further focus groups for analysis so that the information obtained was more deeply grounded. The intention and scope of this study and the time available to the researcher, however, did not allow for such extended application. The two focus groups generated much valuable information on a range of issues, and confirmed and extended understandings of key variables in the study. More data related to the research questions, particularly in terms of a wider range of situated contexts could have occurred. However, in terms of the study findings on authenticity it is unlikely that additional significant findings would have been obtained, as it was clear from the Phase Three case studies that participants behaved in an authentic manner regardless of context.

In Phase Three, a limitation relating to a more traditional approach to triangulation (Burns 2000) of this phase of the study might appear, in these terms, to be in the lack of cross referencing from outside sources for the information given by the respondents. However, this phase of the study is based on perceptions of lives lived and perceived linkages to lifelong learning and agelessness, and is not claimed, or intended to be, a documentation of 'facts' about the lives of the subjects. Moreover, the data in this phase are often about what the subjects believe has made a difference in their lives, and no amount of supporting data will provide confirmation of this or dispute the comments authentically made.

However, as the information supplied arose in the course of the interviews, due caution was taken in creation of an interview process likely to support trustworthiness, including the summarising and clarification of key issues within the interview process, as necessary. Support for the information subjects supplied has, it can be postulated, emerged in the course of the interviews as people basically triangulated their own information by internal cross-referencing, for example, in discussing the same event at different times.

## 6.6 Concluding comments

In conclusion, there appears to be a link between agelessness and lifelong learning, but there is something more that is related to the shaping of identity. People demonstrating agelessness characteristics also demonstrate many of the characteristics of lifelong learners, and see themselves as having identity resources of a particular kind or quality incorporated into their identities. People viewed as demonstrating agelessness characteristics were change agents, both for themselves and often for others, crafting their ongoing identity development through attitude and actions in response to change. It was noticeable in the narratives that life difficulties, and in particular epiphanies, were influential as a catalyst for learning from change. Identity resources may be viewed as having been assisted in development by adversities, and by epiphanies in particular.

Agelessness is a powerful force for change. This study developed a deeper understanding of the concept and the processes underlying it, however societal attitudes towards age and ageing need to be reviewed as increases in longevity are likely to continue. Age is a human condition that all individuals have to eventually contend with. It has physical, mental and spiritual elements which throughout life lead us to challenge and question life meanings. As Sophocles (n.d.) avowed “the gods alone have neither age nor death”.

An emphasis on increased personal responsibility for the outcomes of ageing is occurring through changes in government policies catalysed by longevity. This study informs ways in which people of any age might become more effective learners, with benefits both in terms of social costs and also for individuals involved. For example, it would be useful in assisting learning hosted by institutions, such as universities and T.A.F.E.s, in regard to practical ways identity development could be utilised in how older individuals learn. Consequently, this study confirms the need to support and assist ageing throughout life, and for an increased understanding of agelessness and ageing issues as a basis for future government policies and by individuals in responding to life experiences.

In terms of the study definition, “A person who conducts their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in”, this study demonstrates that agelessness and lifelong learning are an important part of an engagement between the culture and the individual.

Phillip Larkin (1974) in a poem describing negative stereotypical perceptions of age wrote:

What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
And you keep pissing yourself, and can't remember  
Who called this morning?  
...Why aren't they screaming?

Although it may not be necessary to scream to resist negative stereotyping of ageing, it is clear from the development of the concept of agelessness that it is necessary to do something, to act in response to changes in life unrelated to age. Change impacts on the crafting of identity, and through change, learning about ourselves unrestricted by age becomes, as one subject mentioned, “a lifelong opportunity”. Agelessness offers a concept of ageing that was described by one study subject as “an inspirational activation of my mind and my heart”.

### **Appendix A: Phase One Process**

In a lecture theatre setting, new to university students were informed of the background and justification for the study before the concept of agelessness was introduced by means of

- The definition for the study
- What agelessness is not:

Gerophobia

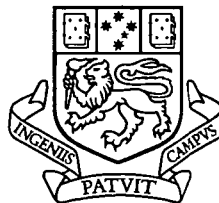
Ageism

- Students were then asked the following question and recorded their responses to with no input from anyone else:

Think of someone you know – of any age – who seems to you to be an agelessness person in terms of the study definition.

What key words would describe the characteristics they have that have led you to think that?

**Appendix B: Letter to focus group members**



**UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA**  
**Faculty of Education**  
**Locked Bag 1-370**  
**Launceston**

*My phone numbers: Home 63341863*  
*Work 63243047*

26 April 2005

Dear ,

Earlier in the year you attended a session I presented related to the concept of “agelessness.” I would like to thank you for your input at that time, and to invite you to meet with a small group of others who indicated that they would be pleased to be involved in a Focus Group to discuss “agelessness” and lifelong learning.

The Focus Group is a discussion group that I will facilitate, and is designed to find out your views. It will last between one and one and a half hours. Please come to discuss these important subjects, I know you will enjoy it and I really value you giving time to talk about this. Tea and coffee and biscuits will be provided in part repayment of your time!

<p>Please come to the session planned for ...10.00- 11.30 a.m. on .....the ..... in room ...A132 at the University of Tasmania in Launceston. (come to the Faculty of Education desk in building A just off the Gallery for directions if you need to)</p>
--

Please bring the Statement of Informed Consent with you.

It is VERY important for the study that if you are not able to attend that you contact me as soon as possible so I can try to get a replacement.

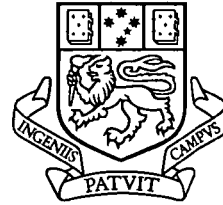
Thank you very much and I look forward to seeing you.

Yours sincerely

Paul Throssell  
PhD student at the University of Tasmania



### **Appendix C: Information sheet for focus group members**



UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
School of Early Childhood/Primary Education

#### ***Information sheet for project participants***

This study looks at the relationship between lifelong learning and agelessness and is being conducted within the Faculty of Education in the University of Tasmania at Launceston. This project is being undertaken to fulfil the requirements for a PhD degree.

This research is important because cultural perceptions about age which are based on stereotypes and ageist actions can limit our wellbeing. Limitations on the way our lives are conducted also have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our lives.

If you agree to participate you will be a member of a focus group of 6-8 members which will discuss topics relevant to the areas of agelessness and lifelong learning for approximately one hour. The group will be facilitated by Mr. Paul Throssell an investigator of the study. With your permission the discussion will be audio tape recorded and later transcribed.

Confidentiality Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality: transcriptions will not contain any identifying information (names or gender), tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a secure room and all data will be collapsed into themes rather than as individual contributions. Every precaution will be taken to guard against your responses being identifiable by people who know you. You may be assured that your academic standing will not be prejudiced by your comments.

Participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

If you have any queries about this study please contact:

The Chief Investigator  
Associate Professor Ian Falk on telephone Tel. (03) 63243713  
Fax 63243040 or email [Ian.Falk@utas.edu.au](mailto:Ian.Falk@utas.edu.au)

### **Concerns or complaints**

If you have any concerns of an ethical nature or complaints about the manner in which the project is conducted, you may contact the Chair or Executive Officer of the University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Chair is Dr Margaret Otlowski, Tel. (03) 62 267569 and the Executive Officer is Ms Chris Hooper, Tel. (03) 62 262763.)

If you have any ethical or personal concerns related to the study, you may choose to discuss these concerns confidentially with a University Student Counsellor.

This project has received ethical approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### **Results of investigation**

If you wish we will send you a brief summary of the results of the study when all data has been analysed.

### **Information sheet and consent form**

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and statement of informed consent to keep.

Many thanks for participating.

Appendix D: Focus groups

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

*Title of project: The concept of agelessness, and its relationship to lifelong learning.*

This study looks at the concept of agelessness with a view to establishing possible connections between agelessness, lifelong learning, and social wellbeing.

I agree to participate in this research project and understand that:

- 1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this study.
- 2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
- 3. I understand that I will be a part of a focus group of 6-8 members which will discuss topics relevant to the areas of agelessness and lifelong learning.
- 4. The time required for focus group involvement will be approximately one hour.
- 5. I understand that all research data will be treated as confidential.
- 6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- 7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a subject.
- 8. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice. Withdrawal will not prejudice my university standing.

Name of subject .....

Signature of subject ..... Date .....

I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator .....

Signature of investigator ..... Date .....

### Appendix E: Focus group discussion guidelines

Dates of operation 12/10/01 & 15/10/01

- Introduction

My name is Paul Throssell and I'd like to welcome you to this focus group and thank you for giving your time.

This study is to investigate whether agelessness is related to lifelong learning. The reason for getting a group like this together is to discuss the questions raised about agelessness and lifelong learning.

It is suggested that perceptions of agelessness in a person enables them to better choose to respond to educational opportunities throughout their lives. An assumption is made that learning is how we adapt to change.

A review of literature in the area 'firmed-up' a tentative definition for a person who is perceived to have agelessness qualities as 'conducting their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in.' In effect to live in ways that are not stereotypical in this society for their actual age. (*written on a white board in remaining in full view of participants throughout the focus group*)

I will be listening to all the different things you have to say, and helping to make sure we hear from all of you. I'm looking forward to hearing a wide range of different points of view. I'm tape recording the session to make sure I don't miss anything you say.

Discussion on ageism and gerophobia followed as per exploratory study.

- Topic 1: Inter-generational issues

Would you write complete the following sentence stubs (hand-out):

- 1.1 "I believe older people view younger people as...."
- 1.2 And "I believe that younger people view older people as..."
- 1.3 Is there a difference? (Probe: What is it?)

- Topic 2: Characteristics of agelessness (link to Research Question One)

2.1 Think of a person who shows characteristics of agelessness. Picture that person. What characteristics do they have that led you to think that?

(Probes: How are these shown? Can you tell me more about those characteristics?)

- Topic 3: Exhibiting descriptors of agelessness (link to Research Question Four)

3.1 Can you think of why it is that some individuals show the characteristics of agelessness that you mention?

- Topic 4: The influence of critical life events on individual's choices associated with attaining agelessness characteristics (link to Research Question Five)

4.1 Do you think that there are particular critical life events (something that happens in our lives that is the catalyst for change) that influence individual's choices in attaining characteristics of agelessness?

4.2 What kind of events do you see as being critical to change in this way? (Probe: Do you think or know that there was an incident, event, 'defining moments' or transition in life, in which the agelessness person you are thinking of showed that).

- Topic 5: The connections between agelessness and social wellbeing (link to Research Question Three)

5.1 Do you think that the characteristics of agelessness we've discussed affect the way that the agelessness person you thought of lives? (Probe: Can you give me an example? For example the quality of their life, their lifestyle or happiness generally?)

5.2 Then discuss ... Do you think that there are stereotypes of certain ages? (Probe: Which ones come to mind? Which ones come to mind about how people act or behave?)

5.3 What effect do these stereotypes of age have on the way people live their lives?

5.4 How does health come into this? (Probe: What sort of health? Can you give an example?)

- Topic 6: Characteristics of lifelong learning (link to Research Question Two)

A key theme from the results of the exploratory study was the capacity to respond to change. Let's talk about lifelong learning and its link to change.

6.1 Let's think about lifelong learning. What's lifelong?

6.2 What's learning?

6.3 What is your understanding of lifelong learning?

(Probe: Can you think of any examples of lifelong learning? What about times you weren't on a course? Can learning be informal?)

6.4 Where does lifelong learning happen?

6.5 How does the way we respond to change affect lifelong learning? (Probe: Can you think of reasons for this?)

- Topic 7: The relationship between age and lifelong learning (link to Research Question Six and Guiding Research Question)

7.1 So how does age relate to lifelong learning?

(Probes: Is there any link between them? In what way? Can you give any examples?)

### Appendix F: Focus group: Assistant moderator responsibilities

(Incorporating comments and adapted from Krueger & Casey 2000, p.121)

1. Take responsibility for equipment and supplies:

tape recorder	<u>refreshments</u>
blank audio tapes	tea and coffee
name tags	milk (obtain)
white board markers	water
spare batteries	cups (polystyrene)
handouts for participants	urn (filled and hot for start of group)

2. Assist in setting up refreshments.

3. Assist in room arrangement.

4. Assist in setting up equipment.

5. Welcome participants (and any latecomers).

6. Sit out side the group, opposite the moderator and close to the door.

7. Take notes throughout the discussion. Attend to the following:

- Make a sketch of the seating arrangement
- Note the non- verbal activity. Watch for head nods, physical excitement, eye contact between participants, or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support or interest.
- Well said quotes. Write enough to clearly indicate level of agreement, support or interest. Listen for sentences that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a particular point of view. Place your opinions, thoughts or ideas in parentheses to keep them separate from participant comments.

8. Monitor recording equipment- VERY IMPORTANT

- Occasionally glance at tape recorder to see if reels are moving. Tapes are 45 minutes per side.
- Turn over tape or insert another tape when appropriate.

9. Do not participate in the discussion! Talk only if the moderator invites you.

Control your non-verbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.

10. Ask questions when invited.

11. Debrief following the focus group. Participate in the debriefing with the moderator. Record the debriefing.

12. Tidy notes made and discuss with the moderator. When transcript is completed discuss with moderator.

**Appendix G: Focus groups: Assistant moderator debriefing sheet**

Overall impressions

Notable quotes

Key ideas or insights presented

Which topics generated the most energy?

The extent to which each topic generated either consensus or differences of opinion.

How the groups compared

Any new emerging topics?

### **Appendix H: Phase Three: Phone contact-interviews**

My name is Paul Throssell and I'm doing a PhD study at the University of Tasmania. My study is on agelessness and lifelong learning. Your name was given to me/ you are known to others, as a vibrant and active learner.

I want to ask you if I can interview you as an important part of the study.

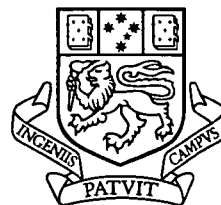
I think this research is important because the way we think about age in our society is often based on stereotypes and ageist actions and can limit our wellbeing and the way we live our lives

There are three interviews all about an hour long and they can be at any time suitable for you.

Thank you for participating. I'll send you a letter that goes into more detail. (*Ask for address to send it to*)



**Appendix I: Letter to Phase Three subjects**



*My phone numbers: Home 63341863  
Work 63243047*

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
Faculty of Education  
Locked Bag 1-307  
Launceston

Dear ,

Following my discussion with you by telephone recently, I would like to invite you to be an important part of this study.

I am pleased that you agreed to be interviewed and to discuss agelessness and lifelong learning, terms which are increasingly used in recent times, often without being clear in saying what they are.

You have been chosen as your name was mentioned after a number of people with a considerable experience, expertise and knowledge of learning mentioned you in connection with my study as a vibrant and active learning person.

This research is important because the way we think about age in our society is often based on stereotypes and ageist actions and can limit our wellbeing. Limitations on the way our lives are conducted also have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our lives.

Questions I will ask you about your life include some describing some Turning Point Moments. These are events which may have had an important effect on choices you have made to change parts of your life.

To assist in you remembering and thinking about any of these events, a 'Life Time-Line' and some 'Turning Point Moments' sheets are enclosed which you might find useful as 'thinking aids', and that you can bring to the first interview.

The interviews are designed to find out your views. The first will last approximately one hour and there are two follow up interviews (at mutually agreeable times) of about the same length as I mentioned to you.

I know you will enjoy it and I really value you giving time to talk about this.

I look forward to seeing you at .....on .....the .....

at.....

Please remember to bring with you:

- the Statement of Informed Consent and
- the Life Time-Line AND some Turning Point Moments sheets.

It is VERY important for the study that if you are not able to attend that you contact me as soon as possible so I can try to get a replacement. Thank you very much and I look forward to seeing you.

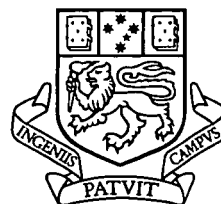
Many thanks for participating

Yours sincerely

Paul Throssell

PhD student at the University of Tasmania

### Appendix J: Information sheet



UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA  
School of Early Childhood/Primary Education

## *Information sheet for project participants*

This study looks at the relationship between lifelong learning and agelessness ...

The project is being undertaken to fulfil the requirements for a PhD degree by Paul Throssell within the Faculty of Education in the University of Tasmania at Launceston. This research is important because cultural perceptions about age which are based on stereotypes and ageist actions can limit our wellbeing. Limitations on the way our lives are conducted also have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our lives.

If you agree to participate you will be one of three people who will discuss topics relevant to the areas of agelessness and lifelong learning. It is intended that there will be three interviews, each lasting for approximately one hour. The interviews will be facilitated by Mr. Paul Throssell an investigator of the study. With your permission the discussion will be audio tape recorded.

### Confidentiality

Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality.

Transcriptions will not contain any identifying information (names or gender) and tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in a secure room. Every precaution will be taken to guard against your responses being identifiable by people who might know you.

Participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

If you have any queries about this study please contact:  
The Chief Investigator

Professor Ian Falk on telephone Tel. (03) 63243713 Fax 63243040 or email <a href="mailto:Ian.Falk@utas.edu.au">Ian.Falk@utas.edu.au</a>
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### Concerns or complaints

If you have any concerns of an ethical nature or complaints about the manner in which the project is conducted, you may contact the Chair or Executive Officer of the

University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Chair is Dr. Janet Vial, Tel. (03) 62 264842 and the Executive Officer is Ms Chris Hooper, Tel. (03) 62 262763.) If you have any ethical or personal concerns related to the study, you may choose to discuss these concerns confidentially with a University Student Counsellor.

This project has received ethical approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Results of investigation

If you wish we will send you a brief summary of the results of the study when all data has been analysed.

### Information sheet and consent form

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and statement of informed consent to keep.

Many thanks for participating.

Appendix K: Statement of informed consent

*Title of project: The concept of agelessness, and its relationship to lifelong learning.*

This study looks at the concept of agelessness with a view to establishing possible connections between agelessness, lifelong learning, and social wellbeing.

I agree to participate in this research project and understand that:

- 1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this study.
- 2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
- 3. I understand that I will be interviewed discussing topics relevant to the areas of agelessness and lifelong learning.
- 4. The time required for interviews will be approximately one hour.
- 5. I understand that all research data will be treated as confidential.
- 6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- 7. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a subject.
- 8. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice.

Name of subject .....

Signature of subject ..... Date .....

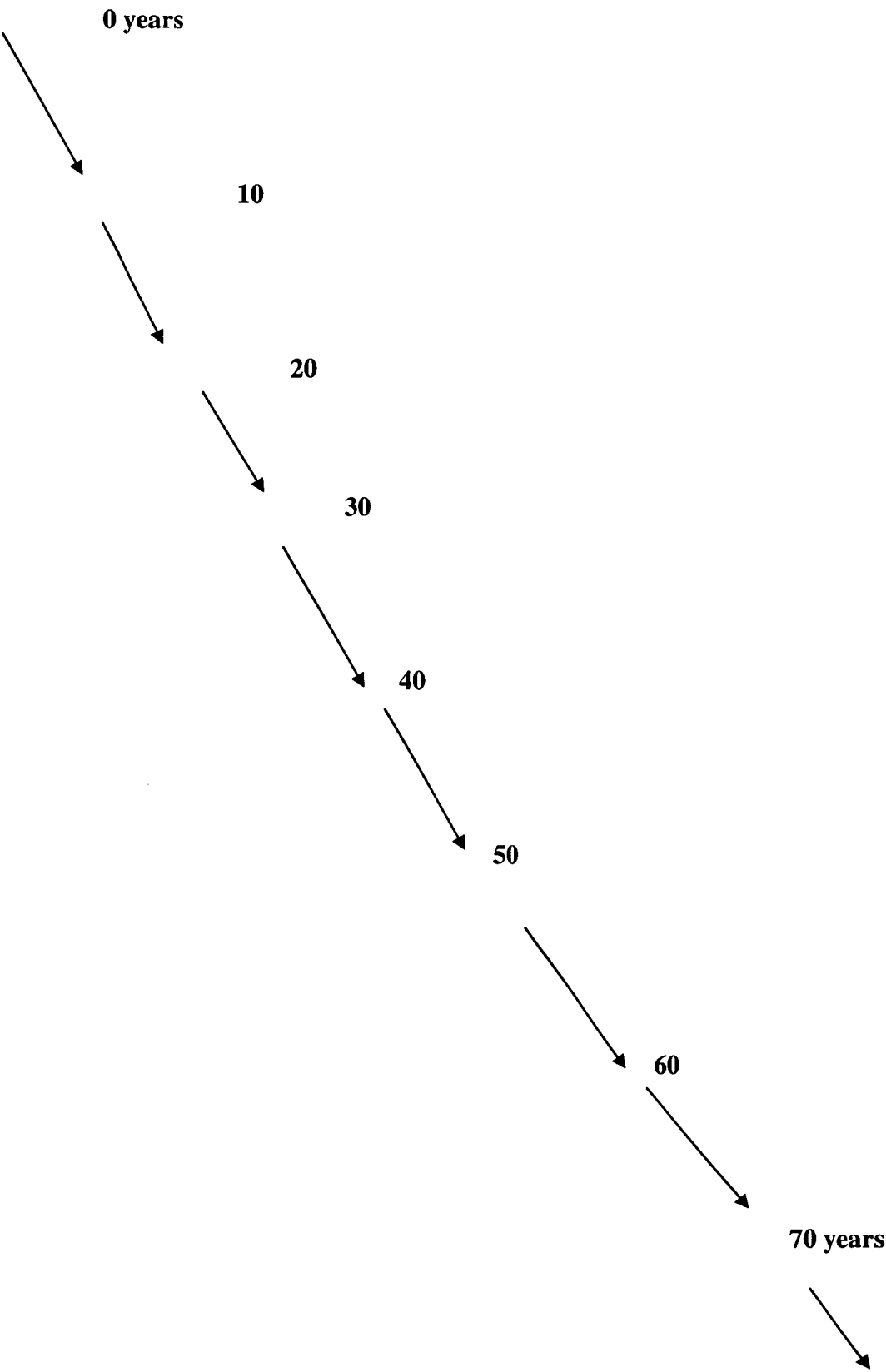
I have explained this project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name of investigator .....

Signature of investigator ..... Date .....

**Appendix L: Life timeline**

As a thinking-aid to the interview would you enter the major turning- point moments that changed your life.



**Appendix M**

**TURNING POINT MOMENTS**

Before attending the interview, to help your focus on important parts of your life would you think of any **Turning point moments/ critical life events/ epiphanies that changed your life. These could be:**

- an experience that shatters a person's life, making it never the same again.
- a series of events that have built up in the person's life
- a moment where underlying tensions and problems in a situation or relationship are revealed
- where the individual relives, or goes through again, a major turning-point moment in his or her life.

**Name a Turning Point Moment that changed your life? How did it occur?**

**Age at the time (please circle) 0-10 11-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 over 60**

**Who were you with?**

(Family /other significant people such as friends):

**Where were you?** (Place: town/city, country  
Neighbourhood)

**Was the moment linked to learning/education?**  
(In what way?)

**Was the moment linked to  
Work/occupation/  
or career?**

**What was happening in society at the time?**

Societal context, influences and systems at the time. (Such as war, social policies and systems or the way society was stratified/class system)

### **Some of these may include:**

Loss/sorrow, happiness, achievement, health, romance, moving to a different place, birth of a child and so on

### Examples

- Death of a spouse/ close family member/ close friend
- Divorce
- Marital separation
- Jail term
- Personal injury or illness
- Marriage
- Retirement
- Pregnancy
- Change in financial state
- Change to a different line of work
- Outstanding personal achievement
- Begin or end school
- Change in living conditions/ residence
- Revision of personal habits



### Appendix N: Phase Three biographical case studies interview one proforma

- INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW

Note: All that is said aloud as the basis for the interview discussion is in regular or bold type. Italics are used for further information and interviewer instructions. General and contextual probes to be used as appropriate

My name is Paul Throssell and I'd like to welcome you to this interview and thank you for giving your time.

This study is investigating whether age is related to lifelong learning. The reason for interviewing you is to discuss your life and how that might relate to agelessness and lifelong learning.

It is suggested that characteristics of agelessness in a person enables them to better choose to respond to educational opportunities throughout their lives. An assumption is made that learning is how we adapt to change.

A review of literature in the area earlier this year has 'firmed-up' a tentative definition for a person who is perceived to have agelessness qualities as:

*'conducting their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in.'* (Living in ways that are not stereotypical in this society for their actual age)

*(this definition is written on paper and remains in full view of the participant throughout the interview)*

*Discussion on ageism and gerophobia as examples of what agelessness is not followed as per exploratory study and focus groups.*

I will be listening to all the different things you have to say, and asking you questions to help me make sure I am clear on what you are saying. I'm looking forward to hearing about your life. As I mentioned to you before, I'm tape recording the session to make sure I don't miss anything you say.

- Questions interview one

*Questions will focus on asking the respondent to discuss their lives up to the present time. In particular to discuss turning point moments/ epiphanies/critical life events, and to perceive any linkages to age, agelessness and to lifelong learning.*

*Important:* *The questions below are utilised as a basis for the discussion and it is not intended that these be followed in any particular structural order or for all of them to be covered. The respondents' prior focus on their 'Life Timeline' and some 'Turning Point Moments' may assist discussion especially in initial questions.*

*For all questions further depth of explanation could be made through use of 'General Probes' and 'Probes Related to Situated Context'*

- Looking back, would you tell me about a turning–point moment, (critical life events, an incident, event, ‘defining moments’ or transition in life- something important that happened to change your life) in your life. Start wherever you like/on whatever comes to mind first.
- Put yourself in one of those turning point times, where your own personal reserves/resources were ‘on the line’? What personal qualities/characteristics did you show to overcome that difficult period?
- **AGE** In the culture of your childhood – (Vietnamese culture/ In Aboriginal culture/ in our culture) what word do you associate with the word age?
- Have you ever been treated differently in the past because of your age? *Probe:* How did you feel about that?
- If you didn’t know how old you are how old would you be/ do you feel?
- What is agelessness to you?
- Tell me about a turning point moment that was the catalyst for change (or influenced you in choosing any *characteristics*) in ways of agelessness?  
*Probe:* Would you tell me about/describe that experience?
- Do you think that there are stereotypes of certain ages in Vietnamese/ Aboriginal/ this society? Can you give me an example?  
  
*Probe:* Do you think that there are any that you have followed? Or Do you think you have followed at any time in your life the way society might have expected you to behave because of your age.  
*Probe:* Which ones come to mind? Which ones come to mind about how you acted or behaved? When do you think you went against that? What caused you to choose to do that?
- Some people think of their lives as having had a particular course, as having gone up and down. Some people think it hasn’t gone down. Some people see it as having gone in a circle. How do you see your life? Which way has it gone?  
*Probe:* How has that happened? Can you tell me about that?
- After any of the turning points did you feel a change happened immediately or did it take a time to get it together (*synthesise information*) *Probe:* In the gap between turning points was learning keeping happening/ongoing?
- **LEARNING** (In Vietnamese culture/ In Aboriginal culture)... What word do you associate with the word learning?
- What do you think your attitude to learning is?

- What do you remember about any turning point moments that changed or influenced your attitude towards learning? Would you tell me about/describe that experience?  
*Probes:* How did it do that? 0-10 years of age, 11-20 years of age (and so on) Was there any learning that changed your life? How did that come about?
- Which other events or turning points stand out as having changed the way you have lived your life so far?  
*Probe:* How did this affect you at the time/immediately? In the long term? How did the incident fit/integrate into your life then?
- Were there any turning point moments when you were 0-10? ...*up to age 20... or in 20 year chunks?*  
*Probe:* How did that moment change your life?
- Are there any more turning point moments you would like to talk about?  
*(perhaps there are areas written in the completed 'Life Time-Lines' and 'Turning Point Moments' but not commented upon so far).*
- Do you think that turning points are looked at/regarded differently in a Vietnamese/ Aboriginal culture?
- **Conclusion of interview**

To conclude, it seems that...

*(A summary of some of the main points raised in the interview was made in detail for the subject to respond to and further clarify when necessary)*

### Possible probes to use in the interview

#### General Probes:

How did that occur? How did you respond to that [event]? What emotions did you feel? Did that lead to you following any patterns of behaviour/ behaving differently?

#### Probes for Situated Contexts

Possible probes related to situated context such as those on 'Turning Point Moments' include Societal, historical contexts, place and people.

You mention that...location/place, people... how did that affect what happened?

Are these turning point moments related to family, - tell me more about your family at the time? Were your children going to school? What was your partner doing?

Describe your relationship with...

Are these turning point moments related to education or workplace, (the work you were doing...)

Are these turning point moments related to social situations including friends?

Are these turning point moments related to retirement and death?

Was what was happening in society at that time affect that?

How was that related to age? How was that related to learning?

### Appendix O: Phase Three biographical case studies Interview Two proforma

Note: All that is said aloud as the basis for the interview discussion is in regular or bold type. Italics are used for further information and interviewer instructions. General and contextual probes to be used as appropriate

- Introduction

The interviewee was made comfortable by everyday chatter such “How are you?” and complimented on responses to interview One and asked for any concerns related to that interview.

- Questions interview two

- If you were to view your life as a book of different chapters and you were writing your life story what would the different chapters be about? What would the present chapter be about?

- Tell me about a regular day for you at the moment?

*Probe:* What are your daily schedules in everyday life?

How does your family come into it?

...community involvement?

...environment?

...their interests?

*Choose different parts of a day described and discuss how things are related to a situated context, such as related to an event they have described (e.g. a visit to a daughter) and discuss the relationship linked to the study*

**AGE** *Probe:* Is your relationship ... with your family/ the community / your job/ influenced by your age?

- How does age come into your day for you? *Probe:* Can you tell me how that happened/happens?
- Describe a time recently where you feel your age influenced the way someone responded to you? *Probe:* How do you feel about that?
- Do people treat you differently because of your age?
- How are you viewed by younger people?
- How are you viewed by older people?  
*Probe:* How do you feel about that? (*emotional impact*)

*Further probe: (Situating context)* Does this change depending on the circumstances? Is this different in your family? (*community area*) on transport or in shops? In any work you do?

- In Interview One you mentioned about how old would you be if you didn't know how old you were? *Probe:* How come? How do you see yourself at the moment to do with age?

- What is your attitude to age? *Probe:* Does age affect your attitude?

*Situating context probe:* Is your attitude to age the same with your family in any work or in anything you do in the community?

- You mentioned some characteristics you have now that are not to do with the way society/ your community (stereotypical) views of age, do you know where these come from?

*Context:* Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?

- To what extent do you think the way you are viewed and behaved towards is influenced by the way you physically look?
- How important is the way you physically look to how others see you/treat you/ behave towards you?

*Probe: (Context)* How does this change depending on what's happening or where you are or who you're with? (*the circumstances/ situation/ environment/ context?*)

- Do you think that there are stereotypes of certain ages that you live now? (*Probe:* Which ones come to mind about how you act or behave now? What effect do these stereotypes of age have on the way you live their life?)

- lifelong learning

A key theme from the results of the exploratory study was how (*the capacity*) to respond to change. Let's talk about lifelong learning and its link to change.

- What's lifelong? What's learning? What is your understanding of lifelong learning?
- Are you a lifelong learner now? *Probe:* Can you think of any examples of what you do as a lifelong learner?
- What does it mean to be a lifelong learner?
- What about times you weren't on a course? Can your lifelong learning be informal?)
- Where does lifelong learning happen for you now?

- How does learning come into your day for you? *Probe:* Can you tell me how that happened?
- Describe a time recently where you were in a new learning situation and your attitude to learning helped you to learn something new? *Probe:* Can you tell me how that happened?
- You mentioned some characteristics you have now that are to do with learning, do you know where these come from for you?

*For all questions potential probes-Context:* Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?

### AGE and lifelong learning

- How does your age influence your learning now?

### Social wellbeing

- How does health come into this for you now? (*Probe:* What sort of health? Can you give an example?)
- Does your health (*and other aspects of social wellbeing*) affect the way you live your day? *Probe:* In what way?
- How does your age influence your health, finances (*and social wellbeing key areas*) now?
- What does being involved in life mean to you?

*Probes:* How involved are you now? How do you show/demonstrate it?  
How does age affect your involvement? How does learning affect your involvement? How important is it for you to be involved in life now?

How important is:

- having control over your life? (*internal locus of control*)
  - 'enjoying what you do for its own sake'?(*intrinsic motivation*)
  - ☐ being able to see the funny side and have fun/play?(*a sense of disbelief- (Levy year )*)
  - Is passion/strong enthusiasm for any parts of life important to you?
- Probe: Situated Context*  
Does this depend on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context it occurs in?
- Do you think you have a positive effect on others? In what way?
  - Do you think others see you as a model of agelessness? In what way?
  - Do you think others see you as a model of a lifelong learner? In what way?

***Context:* Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?**

### • Conclusion of interview

To conclude, it seems that...

(A summary of some of the main points raised in the interview was made for the subject to respond to and further clarify in detail when necessary)

### APPENDIX P: PHASE THREE Biographical case studies- Interview Three proforma-

Note: All that is said aloud as the basis for the interview discussion is in regular or bold type. Italics is used for further information and interviewer instructions. General and contextual probes to be used as appropriate

- Introduction

The interviewee was made comfortable by everyday chatter such “How are you?” and complimented on responses to Interviews One and Two and asked for any concerns related to that interview.

- Questions interview three

- Given what you have said about your life before, and given what you have said about the way you live your life now, how do you understand the following?:

#### Key questions

- What is the effect of age in your life?
- How does age affect your attitude?  
*Situated context:* Is your attitude to age the same with your family, in any work or in the community?
  - to agelessness in your life?
  - to learning in your life?
- Is age related to learning?
- How does age relate to your lifelong learning? So how does age relate to lifelong learning for you?
- (*Probes:* Is there any link between them? In what way? Can you give any examples in your life?)
- Do you think that the characteristics of agelessness we’ve discussed in you affect the way you live? (*Probe:* Can you give me an example? For example the quality of their life, their lifestyle or happiness generally?) [*age related to social wellbeing*]
- Given what you have constructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future? to do with age? to do with learning? (*Future orientation*)
- When you reflect on how what has happened in your life to bring you to your present situation, what do you feel about that?



- What are your opinions about society today compared to your early life regarding age?...lifelong learning?...social wellbeing?...the concept of agelessness?

(*Probe*: How does this happen? *Situated Context*: Does this depend on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context it occurs in?)

### Change

- Do you think that there are particular turning point moments (critical life events, an incident, event, 'defining moments' or transition in life-something that happened in your life) that were the catalyst for change and influenced your choices in your attitude to learning? *Probe*: How much control do you have on those changes?
- How do you feel you have dealt with change?
- How has age had an effect on change for you?
- How does the way you respond to change affect your lifelong learning? *Probe*: Can you think of reasons for this?  
*Context*: Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?

### Choice in actions

- To what extent do you feel you have a choice in your actions related to agelessness?
- To what extent do you feel you a choice in your actions related to lifelong learning?
- To what extent do you feel you a choice in your actions related to social wellbeing?

(*Probe*: Do you think it is possible to choose to change to assist you in developing the use of agelessness characteristics? Being a lifelong learner?)

### Identity

- How are you different from other people?
- In an earlier part of this study one respondent intriguingly differentiated maturity from agelessness as being "something that comes anywhere along the chronological age."  
*Probe*: Is maturity related to age for you? Is maturity related to learning for you?  
*Situated context*: Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?

- How important has the culture of your childhood been for you?

- How important is the way you physically look to how you feel about yourself?  
*Context:* Does this change depending on the circumstances/ situation / environment/ context?

*[Optional]* How will you know that you are ready to die? When do you think you will be ready to die? How old do you think you would be when you die?

- **Conclusion of interview**

To conclude, it seems that...

*(A summary of some of the main points raised in the interview was made for the subject to respond to and further clarify in detail where necessary)*

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